

VISION

OF TOMORROW

SEPTEMBER 5/-



Cassandra's Castle

Lee Harding

STANLEY
PITT

VISION OF TOMORROW

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EDITORIAL

Respectable?

Recently your editor was visited by a BBC television interviewer, ostensibly for an interview about this magazine. A cameraman was also in attendance. The subsequent filmed interview interested me a good deal, from the point of view of the questions put to me by the interviewer. An affable, personable chap, he typified in a fair degree the attitude of the "general public" towards science fiction.

One of the cherished beliefs of the modern sf fan is that our type of literature is nowadays respectable. Not to my visitor it wasn't! Almost his first question was, "Why do you think that science fiction is a dirty word so far as literature is concerned?" The question took me by surprise, and although I argued the point, there can be no doubt that such prejudice is still widespread. Why is this?

A few months ago, author E. C. Tubb touched on this subject in a special VISION article. He pointed—correctly I feel—to the old gimmick stories of the past with their emphasis on science, or pseudo-science. Too much of it was not far from the level of comic strips. Admittedly, there was a good deal of gold hidden amongst the dross—Campbell, Simak, Weinbaum, Williamson, and others.

Space travel was a dominant theme in those early days, handled by both good and indifferent writers. When man actually landed on the moon (a year ago as this is being written) much of the early science fiction achieved a pseudo-respectability. The sf dream of space flight had been realised—the writers and readers had been proven right. For a while, sf received a pat on the back from the mass media. Similarly, advances in medical science, especially transplant techniques, have given a cloak of respectability to the early sf horror stories in the Frankenstein tradition. The shifting of astronomical opinion towards the belief that life is widespread in the universe

has even revived interest in bug-eyed monsters, or little green men.

Ironically, what has suddenly become "respectable" is a whole host of the horrendous clichés of old-fashioned science fiction. It is an image constantly paraded before the public. Appalling television series, such as *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* and the unspeakable *Dr. Who*, enjoy mass audiences. It is much the same story in the cinema.

Somewhere along the line, the *real* science fiction stories, of genuine merit, have been left behind. Modern science fiction, with good characterisation and elements of realism, is not recognised as such outside of the ever-dwindling circle of genuine aficionados and magazine readers. There has even been a concerted and deliberate effort from within the field itself to cover up real science fiction with the label of "speculative fiction"—an effort which has largely succeeded. And can one really blame science fiction authors for wanting to throw off the label when sf is still being stigmatised by its earlier image?

It is sad to think that thousands of readers would never think of reading this magazine, because they still equate sf with the inanities of *Dr. Who* and his ilk. Whilst those readers—and there are a lot of them—who actually enjoy space opera, will be baffled and disappointed to find their appetites for rubbish unsatisfied by our magazine, and will stop buying it. No wonder the sales of several sf magazines are being threatened.

It is not the complete answer, of course. The appalling distribution system prevalent in this country and in America has, and is, contributing to the death of a great number of periodicals, including science fiction. But I think it is definitely a factor—and one I do not think has been hitherto advanced.

Ironical? I think so.

Philip Harbottle

MEMORIES OF THE FUTURE

JOHN BAXTER

PART 3

**New Bottles,
Old Wine.**



'Planet of the Apes' saw sf enter the field of social comment and satire.

Modern science fiction film presents a confused face to the world, wearing a robe of rags and tatters. The films made in America generally adhere to the traditions of thought and design established by *Forbidden Planet*, *This Island Earth* and other classics produced at the peak of the 1950s boom. An increasingly large number of sf films, however, combine this technical sophistication with ideas drawn from social satire (*Planet of the Apes*), scientific documentary (*Fantastic Voyage*) and contemporary events (*Marooned*). Although that most stimulating of all sf film forms, the short-range technological and sociological extrapolation perfected by John Frankenheimer in *Seven Days in May*, *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Seconds*, has not achieved its deserved popularity, its effects can still be felt in films like *Wild in the Streets*, in which teenage pop musical, science fiction and social comment are combined in an energetic glimpse of a teen-dominated future.

Today, however, the most exciting science fiction cinema is that of Europe, where young directors, free of the necessity slavishly to illustrate the fantastic for *blase* audiences, can create exercises in the imagination that combine the best of American pragmatism and European fantasy. In England, France, Italy and eastern Europe, everything from the comic strips to pulp fiction is being used as a departure point into a sf film field richer than any in the history of the genre.

British director Peter Watkins, who made *Culloden* and *The War Game* for BBC TV, has a mind easily adaptable to the imaginative necessities of sf. *Culloden* used science fictional detachment to show the grim battle between English soldiers and Scottish clansmen, the technology of muskets against inadequate claymores, while *The War Game*, grimmer and more controversial, erased the reality of atomic war as a grainy spectre looming in the shadow of tomorrow's tv news. Brutal but compassionate, *The War Game* proved too strong for the stomachs of the BBC, executives and production team both, and agreement was unanimous that it should not be shown to an English audience depressed and dissipated by a tense European political situation and recession at home.

Like Ken Russell, Kevin Billington and most promising British tv directors, Watkins graduated to feature production, beginning with another semi-documentary excursion into the future. *Privilege* (1967) is a glossy parable of pop star Steve Shorter, whose immense popularity is used by a future British government to subdue and then mould youthful opinion. Shorter, played with melancholy ineptitude by ex 'Manfred Mann' lead singer Paul Jones, suffers manipulation in the name of national expediency, changing his image from that of a tortured rebel confined by unfeeling society to a repentant prodigal begging for forgiveness, but, goaded by conscience and the independent views of his girl friend (Jean Shrimpton) he rejects his role and is destroyed by the society he has helped.

As documentary, future or otherwise, the film is often inaccurate. Jones himself has pointed out that individual singers are not popular enough to be adulated as Shorter was, and that the film should have been about a 'Beatles'-like group. Despite this, Jones called the film a 'marvellous, noble failure', and was unsurprised at its total box-office collapse after the art house patrons found it wasn't art and the teenagers that, despite a prominent musical score, it wasn't a musical. Where the film succeeds best is as science fiction, Watkins and his team conjuring up a visionary future that is, in its way, as impressive as the frantic

hedonism of *Wild in the Streets*.

The design and costuming of *Privilege* are especially brilliant. Clothing features a tight, high collar, usually secured at the throat by a chain or metal clasp, symbolic of youth's confinement and Steve's prison background. Materials are brocaded, metallic, bright, blending in with the Steve Shorter Discos and 'Dream Palaces', the latter quasi-temples featuring posters for Shorter-endorsed products and hard sell ad. tapes blaring constantly. Underlining the image is a musical score of liturgical inexorability by Mike Leander, with choirs sweeping over the pulse of an electronic bass. Combined with songs like 'Release Me', sung on stage at a provincial town hall with Shorter ritually confined to a cage by burly policemen, and 'I've Been a Bad, Bad Boy', the gloomy self-pity of which characterises Jones's performance, Leander's music is a vital component of this impressive film.

Since *Privilege*, Watkins has gone to Sweden for *The Gladiators*, another sf film in which wars of the future are settled by gladiatorial contests between national teams, and one assumes he will remain, at least for a time, in the world of sf film, probably the most promising new entrant. Nobody seems likely to equal his realistic depiction of the future, most other European sf film-makers being content to explore more fantastic worlds, using as their departure point not the newspapers but comic strips, some of them so adapted and supercharged by years of European circulation as to outclass in energy even the best of American strips.

One such *bande-dessinée* is the lush space fantasy 'Barella', drawn by Jean-Claude Fôrest and used by Roger Vadim as the basis of his 1968 fantasy. Impersonated with wide-eyed adaptability by a delightful Jane Fonda, Fôrest's sexually emancipated space-woman becomes less independent and erotically acquisitive than the original, though



Documentary was at the heart of 'Fantastic Voyage,' story of an expedition by miniaturised medical team into the human body. Here Stephen Boyd is trapped in the lung.



Jean-Claude Fôrest's sexually emancipated comic-strip heroine was impersonated by Jane Fonda in Roger Vadim's 'Barbarella.'

gaining a sense of humour with which her creator never endowed her. Based on a handful of strip stories, *Barbarella* has the heroine exploring the evil city of Sogo, where a new sin is invented every hour, and in whose streets she encounters the Excessive Machine, a genuine sex organ on which an accomplished artist of the keyboard, in this case Milo O'Shea, can drive a victim to death by pleasure; tempts a lesbian queen who, in her dream chamber, can

make her fantasies take form; and joins briefly a group of ladies smoking a giant hookah which, via a victim struggling weakly in its glass globe, dispenses Essence of Man.

Unfortunately the film's design lack the free fantasy and spring-tight composition of the original, although Fonda, whether writhing in a free-fall strip-tease under the credits, cuddling lasciviously on furs or twitching in agony as mechanical dolls nibble at her thighs, is unfailingly delectable. A better rendering of European comic-strip *panache* is *Diabolik* (1967), Italian fantasy director Mario Bava's version of the classic A. & L. Giussani strip about a handsome master criminal (John Phillip Law) who, assisted solely by his voluptuous mistress (Marisa Mell), plunders a world for which he has a profound and amused contempt.

Lithe and black, *Diabolik* loots the world of its riches, including a solid gold ingot the size of a railway carriage. In his underground hideout, he sets about melting this prize, but is disturbed in the process by police. As he fights them off, the retort explodes, deluging him in molten gold that congeals around his protective suit, leaving visible one leg, one arm and a single blank eye behind his face-plate. Mell returns in widow's sables to weep for her dead lover, and is rewarded with a conspiratorial wink. As she turns to go, planning his rescue, a maniacal laugh echoes around the cave. Judex is alive and living at Cinéclitta.

The shadow of the comic strip looms over Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* also, admixed with a variety of influences from blue movies to pop art, but the basic ambience is of sf. There is little difference between the perfunctory establishment of space travel in the average sf film—a stock shot of a rocket rising, dissolve to pilot's cabin—and Godard's Lemmy Caution (Eddie Constantine) driving his late-model American limousine through 'inter-siderial space' to the alternative universe of *Alphaville*. Godard has paid lip service to the traditions with the same cynicism Hitchcock used in *The Birds*. As for the rest of the film, one has merely to remove the incongruous characterisation of Caution to expose a routine sf plot, with a mysterious computer-ruled city-state where execution is carried out by bikini girls with knives, women are chattels made available to anybody who asks, and the daughter of the ruling authority falls in love with the handsome outsider and runs away with him.

But of course to expose this admittedly trivial story by removing the ideas and words of Caution is to neutralise what universality the film has. For Godard as for Frankenstein, Arnold and Hitchcock, sf film is a vehicle, not the whole point. Godard's reason for using sf, like all his motives, obscure. Clearly he is talking about the mechanical world in which we live and for which the cramped and aseptic corridors of *Alphaville* are an apt symbol. More interesting is the way in which he demonstrates, as Arnold and others have done, that sf in the cinema is little more than a matter of making a frame for reality. *Alphaville* was shot in and around Paris with no attempt to disguise familiar buildings or locations. But as in *Robinson Crusoe On Mars* and Arnold's desert films, an alien mood is established merely by placing in familiar locations the elements of a fantasy plot. For Haskin, a tumble of wreckage and a human hand turns Death Valley into Mars, for Arnold, the cold desert wind ruffling a girl's hair makes her an alien and the desert a place of menace. And for Godard a naked girl in a glass case makes some suburban hotel the *Alpha-ville* Hilton and Eddie Constantine an intergalactic agent.

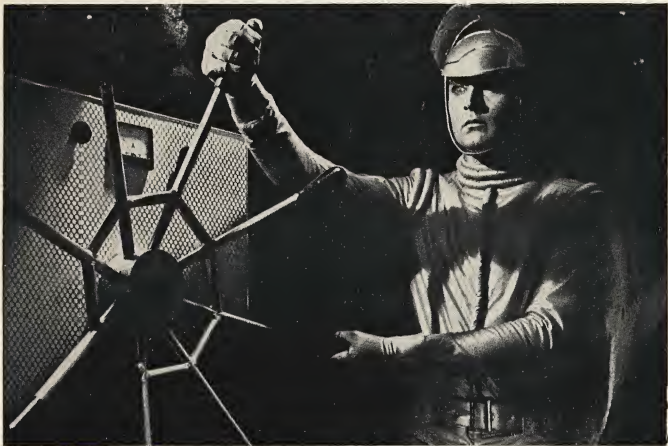
Of other countries to have attempted science fiction, the Eastern European nations and the USSR have succeeded best. Two films especially stand out, one an elaborate space adventure, the other an inquiry into the technological society of today which foreshadows the social reality of tomorrow.

A cross between Frankenstein's cold scientific fantasies and the rich humanist tradition of Soviet cinema, Mikhail Romm's *Nine Days In One Year* (1961) explores with perception and sympathy the new social structure of the technological elite. Exposed to a large dose of radiation during an experiment, physicist Dmitri Gusev (Alexei Batalov) faces the prospect of a lingering death. His wife (Tamara Lavrova) and best friend Ilya (Innokenty Smuktonovsky) draw closer together to help him, but the situation is one Gusev must solve himself. Should he continue with his work and risk the second dose of radiation that will almost certainly kill him, or should he settle down with his wife and the safe job offered by Ilya? A visit to his old home village and endless discussions with friends do not bear on the central problem, which is a personal one. Finally, Gusev continues with his experiments, suffers the inevitable second accident, and is told he cannot hope to survive. The only possible chance is an operation hitherto performed only on dogs, and unsuccessful with them most of the time. As he submits to it, we are left waiting to hear whether he will live or die.

As drama, *Nine Days In One Year* is moving and restrained, full of people whom one instinctively likes because of their warts-and-all characterisation; Smuktonovsky, bright, cynical but likeable as the scientist opting for the

freedom of journalism, Lavrova plump and pleasant as Gusev's wife, Batalov in a diamond sharp performance as the often tedious, always convincing Gusev, wanting to be human but not really believing that a happy marriage is more important than his experiments. The setting, a research station superbly designed by G. Koltchanov, is no aseptic temple of science but a crowded workmanlike bunker jammed with formidable machines. In the English version, sub-titling sometimes makes nonsense of Romm's dialogue—the triumphant scientists burst out after a successful experiment with the cry, 'Hurrah, Neutrons!'—but the script in general explores perceptively the complexities of a world where technology and humanism have not yet found a meeting point.

The second major film from Eastern Europe is the Czech production *Ikarie XB 1* (1963), also known as *Icarus XB 1* and, in the truncated and dubbed American-International version as *Journey To The End Of The Universe*. An imaginative excursion into the future of interplanetary travel, it is given novelty by its clever extrapolation of familiar customs. People on this ship go to dances, have parties, wash, exercise and make love, and although the main continuity of a journey between planets is never lost, it is the social complexity of such a voyage rather than its technical aspects that intrigues us. For this reason, the inserts of drama, especially the discovery of a derelict ship peopled with rotting corpses, victims of some ancient war, are forced. The almost Germanically shadowed and grisly exploration of the ship, the discovery of a gambling hell scene reminiscent of a Mause film and the final explosion seem, however well managed, to belong in another film.



John Phillip Law was master criminal in 'Diabolik,' Mario Bava's comic-strip fantasy.



Still the most amusing kind of sf film—the Z-movies like Robert Hutton's 'The Slime People.'

The same might be said of the unlikely 'trick' ending, which dramatises just how far the cinema lags behind science fiction in ideas; *Ikarie XB 1*, despite its sophistication and realism in comparison with other sf films, is on the level of ideas somewhat less impressive than 1930s 'long ship' stories.

From Germany, fantasy film spread all over the world, but its penetration into Asia has been recent. Aside from the likeable but rough imitations of American space opera by Inoshiro Honda, *Mothra*, *The Mysterians*, *The H Man*, Japanese film-makers have done little with Western fantasy. An exception, however, is Hiroshi Teshigahara's *The Face Of Another* (1967), one of the oddest films to come out of Japan and an apt example of science fiction in the service of a superior cinematic intelligence.

His face burned in an industrial accident, a man has a mask made from a flesh-like plastic to cover his scars. Assuming a new identity, he meets and makes love to his wife under the impression that she does not recognise him. Later, however, she claims that she knew of his ruse all along, and the man turns on the doctor who made the mask and murders him. Meanwhile, in another and apparently unrelated situation, a girl whose face has been burned at Hiroshima commits suicide after having allowed her brother to make love to her.

Visibly, the film is a *pastiche* of *outré* German elements. The doctor's surgery is a timeless limbo where artificial limbs and organs lie on slickly antiseptic shelves surrounded by Leonardo's anatomical drawings and medical sketches of the human face and limbs. The special plastic used for the mask is greasy and obscene, but the doctor handles it with professional relish, extolling its virtues. Meanwhile his nurse lurks in the background, kneading indeterminate lumps into shape with a miniature rolling mill or abstractedly moulding a prosthetic breast.

One's first thought is of Australian/American director Edgar Ulmer, and of his 1930s masterpiece *The Black Cat*. Both films have the same glossy surface and perspex *décor*. The scene of the brother caressing his sister's horribly scarred cheek is a direct expression of a typically German predilection, while the final murder by carving knife and the flood down the street of faceless crowds who brush by the scene is an expressionist vision from the era of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. The wheel has turned full circle, and German fantasy finds its final vindication in the synthesis of conflicting traditions.

True science fiction in the cinema will always remain an American monopoly, so bound up are the traditions of the field with American political and social attitudes. To the connoisseur, the great baroque fantasies like *Forbidden Planet* and engagingly impoverished Z films like *The Slime People* will always be the most interesting parts of this field, and extensions of the latter, such as Jack Arnold's *Creature From The Black Lagoon* cycle, its most stimulating. But the vindication of sf film and its viability as art can be found in its incorporation into the national cinemas of a dozen nations.

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LALÉE

**NORMAN
LAZENBY**



The first time I saw Lalee the emotional impact was so great that, by comparison, the tensions of space were a mere nothing. I was stunned by an admiration which so far only a slender space-ship or a gleaming laser-pistol could evoke. I literally gasped, something only another wrestler could make me do. My eyes lusted—for the first time. My heart-beats quickened, like the excitement generated by landing on an unknown world. Then came the little searching fingers of fear—oh, yes, I was afraid of her!

I had never seen an Earthian girl before. Lalee was the first.

The encounter was the result of a mistake by some employee of Infinite Worlds Incorporated, who owned me. There was no error about our presence on Traject 23/04B because this silvery planet was due for inspection. I had arrived with seventy other officers on an automated space-paradox ship, those tight metallic boxes that transpose by pure mathematics, and Lalee had landed by means of a conventional ship, smuggled in by the foolish man who had been immediately cocooned by the authorities.

On Traject 23/04B authority was Infinite Worlds Incorporated and their officers—and Lalee had promptly run away from them!

She ran with the speed and grace of any wild creature from an animal-bearing planet, the wispy garments clinging to her lithe form, her golden hair streaming out in the highly-oxygenised atmosphere. She darted towards the cylindrical, Producer-spewed building in which I stood, as a spectator to a scene that was remarkable to me.

In all my young life I had trained and worked and mixed only with uniformed men, Earthmen of all ages. I had bowed to them, saluted them, listened to them and expected, in due course, others to be deferential to me. I had seen many forms of animal life on many planets, terrible shapes, laughable minikens, plant-men and vapour-cats.

I had never seen a desirable Earth woman.

Naturally our comprehensive studies of science and biology, during our early years of training, had taught us that women existed on Earth and in the colonised planets of the nearest galaxy; but great care had been taken to ensure that the young officers of Infinite Worlds Incorporated did not meet an Earthian female—or even see a many-hued video tape featuring these creatures.

Lalee rushed into the cylinder. I heard the soft rapid pad of her bare feet on the smooth floor. I galvanised into action, left the window and ran towards her.

'Here—this way!' I rapped.

She collided with me and I had to use all my basic training to subdue a mad excitement which the mere touch of her body against mine brought to me. The need to act swiftly helped me at this moment. Quick physical activity flushed away the preposterous perturbation. I pushed her into the doorway of a nearby store, and seconds later the two Search Officers rushed up and threw questions at me.

'Did that woman come this way?'

'Woman? I've never seen a woman...'

'You didn't see her?'

'Of course not...'

When the agitated men had disappeared, I went into the store. Leaning back against the door, I stared at Lalee.

Even now it is difficult to describe the sensational disturbance to my psycho created by this glowing female of the human race. I didn't realise that her smile was a lure; that the smooth deep tan of her face and the flashing little

gems on her eyebrows and ears were not merely decorative—but temptation. I had never seen such smooth soft arms. Her hair was a sunny halo. Her body was a soft, astounding invitation to pleasures beyond my comprehension. When she spoke her voice was low and gentle.

'Thank you—it's so kind of you to help me...'

I was a stiff, parade-ground figure in a blue and gilt uniform and cap. My eyes were probably round and unnaturally fixed. I know I found trouble with my first few words.

'I—I—have never seen—a—a—woman before...'

'I have heard this planet is one of those odd places.' Her lips seemed as soft as an anemone. 'But you have helped me so kindly... what is your name?'

'Selac Karn, second class Geological Officer.'

'I am Lalee Trell. Oh, I wish I'd never met Thorson! He brought me to this silly world—a place that has never seen a woman! Why are women banned by Infinite Worlds?'

'I—I am not sure. I've given the subject no thought—we are kept away from the worlds where women walk freely. Like the others, I was reared by Infinite Worlds, educated by them at Kalendar and Trilium, for one job only—geological inspection. We are the property of the Company.'

'A slave!' Her very body taunted me.

'No, not slaves,' I objected. 'Infinite Worlds Incorporated think highly of us, care for us and give us training to a high level. We survey and sell planets to underprivileged species, the near-humanians and crustaceans.'

Her long fingers lightly touched her gleaming mouth and rings sparkled. She smiled again. I realised belatedly and with wonder that the heady perfume emanated from this woman; so different to the antiseptics used by my companions.

'You poor boy!' she purred. 'Really—have you never seen an Earth woman—really?'

'This is the first time. If anyone hears about this meeting, I shall be severely punished. It must be against the code—although I have not recently viewed the Statutes.'

'Women are born to help men!' she whispered. 'Don't you know?'

'Infinite Worlds Incorporated give me all the help I need.'

'You were born of a woman...'

'That is so,' I admitted. 'She was laboratory-fertilised and I was taken from her at birth. It's routine. Kalendar has class-rooms of children of all ages right now.'

She had sidled very close to me. My eyes were dragged down to the filmy covering over her breasts. I trembled. I was a man faced with the unknown. Nothing in my galaxy experience or technical training had fitted me for this shocking mixture of fear and delirious temptation.

'You like me—don't you?' she crooned. 'You must—you helped me...'

'I—I—don't know why I helped you!'

'Because I'm a woman, darling—and that is something that does not fall throughout a thousand worlds. Kiss me!'

'Kiss?'

She nodded, smiled and held up those pouting red lips. Momentarily, I mouthed silent words and stood rigid. Then: 'I don't know how to kiss.'

With musical derision she said: 'Well, I shall show you, Selac, dear...'. And this warm, radiant being from the old worlds of Bkad pressed her soft lips to mine and clung to me. She writhed a little, in pleasure. My heart actually

thudded, banging in my chest, as if I'd suddenly been faced with a great interstellar crisis.

It was too much for me and I broke and ran.

Outside the cylindrical building, I stopped near the Producer that had spewed it. Infinite Worlds Incorporated had trained me well; I regained my cool in seconds. Determined to conquer weakness, I went back into the building to investigate. I looked into the store where I had last seen Lalee. She wasn't there. Frowning, walking martially, I went along the corridor. At the turn I nearly bumped into a young man, a stranger who flashed me a grin. He wasn't dressed in the uniform of the Company; he wore a sort of greyish tunic. Apparently he was one of the few privates on Traject 23/04B.

'Have you seen a woman pass this way?' I called out.

'A woman! Did you say "a woman"?'

'Yes.'

'You joke.'

I did not find Lalee. I looked into every store that was open; tried the magnetic doors that were locked; walked several corridors. I went out into the super glare of Traject's daylight and put on my protective glasses as I walked stiffly around the port and depot. I asked no more questions about Lalee; that might have been dangerous. I did see the two Search Officers again and it was obvious they were still looking for the woman.

After an hour of careful movement and deep thought, I came to the surprising conclusion that Lalee had vanished! There was confirmation when I listened to a fragment of talk between two of my fellow officers.

'...that Earth female...did you hear? She was smuggled here...unbelievable...and she's vanished...'

'Ran into the wastes...do you think?'

'No. They sent up a hover to search...and there's no place to hide for many metres on this silver lava. The creature has just disappeared...'

Alone in my cubicle that night I sat with clenched fists and stared at the wall. Trying to repress strange feelings, trying to analyse my mind, I gained nothing but mental confusion as I saw nothing before me but the mocking, lovely face of that woman—Lalee. All the years of training that had taught me that control of the unexpected was of first importance, seemed to be as nothing. I sat and wondered about her. I dwelt on the vision of her. That face—that damnable form in the filmy dress; this visitant from Back had disturbed me as much as if an ancient God had materialised before my eyes!

For the first time in my life the queer sense of criticism towards Infinite Worlds ran softly in the lower lobe of my brain. Why were women banned? After all, why? Was it because we were the Company's property—just that?

Well, if the Company owned us, fed us, gave us great work to do on the fringe of the Galaxy they were entitled to provide for us only the things which were beneficial to us. Possibly females were not good for men of space.

Yet it struck me—our books and subliminal tapes had told us that women walked freely with men on Earth and lived with them, as if there was pleasure to be gained from the associations!

The line of reasoning broke, dissolved, and I saw Lalee again, a vision of torment to a conditioned mind.

I got up, sprayed coolant on my face. I needed rest, for the days and nights of this planet rolled up swiftly.

I heard the gentle knock. Someone was in the corridor. I touched the continuous strip and the magnetic door

opened. I looked straightforwardly.

Lalee sidled into my cubicle, smiling her lure, her coppery-tan skin gleaming, her eyes fascinating pools beneath the glinting gems. Her bare feet made little sound as she rushed close to me. I had to hold her, instinctive'y.

'Hide me—tonight. Here! I must have somewhere to stay...Selac...'

'They—they—said you had vanished!'

'Perhaps they were right!' The laughing, lovely face was right under mine. 'Tomorrow I will vanish from this awful planet. I will not be cocooned...'

'Tomorrow you will vanish? What do you mean?'

'Oh, nothing, darling Selac! I am tired. Please, let me stay here—just one night!'

I nodded dumbly. Again, reason ebbed. Staring, I saw those available lips and remembered the ecstatic contact she called a 'kiss'. Like the strike of a bird of prey, I swiftly joined my mouth to her red cushions. I nearly ate into her lips, and then she pushed me away. Seeing the flecks of taunting light in her eyes, I wondered if the ancient myths had any scientific basis; was she a witch?

'You are learning!' she said playfully. 'But I'm tired. Let us lie down.'

She was very strong. I had to release her. She lay full-length on my couch and watched me. I said: 'Where did you go? How did you escape the Search Officers?'

'Oh—I—er—evaded them...'

'But it's almost impossible—there's nowhere to hide!'

'Almost...'

My mouth dried as I looked at her full body, the incredible vision of breasts and, to me, the mesmeric attraction of round hips. Scraps of knowledge from my early days of schooling came back to me and I recalled some of the odd details of why men lived with women on the old Back planet. I felt suddenly impelled to challenge.

'I could sleep with you!'

'No.'

'Why not? I remember once going through a book-tape which said there was procreative activity between men and women on Earth and the Inner Galaxies.'

'Oh—them! Silly stuff...'

'In a lesson book-tape? That's impossible!'

'No—I mean—people. Silly stuff—between people. Why don't you lie down and sleep?'

'Beside you? I will hold you!'

'Don't get any ideas...'

'Ideas?'

'I am not for you!' As she raised herself, anger blazed in her eyes. As a wrestler, I had seen it in an opponent, but this sudden antagonism in Lalee astonished me. I learnt there and then that Earth women can be other than entertaining. 'Let me tell you—oh, never mind! Why don't you sleep? This horrible planet has a short night.'

I kept insisting: 'You do not think we should procreate?'

'Hell—no...'

'But the book-tape—'

'Forget it! Shut up! You—geological officer—you wouldn't understand. I'm not from Earth—I'm from—oh—another planet. Oh, I'm human—Earthian! My mother and father were born in New Zealand, Earth—but—but—oh, drop dead! Stop talking. Sleep. I'll vanish tomorrow—when the spaceship leaves. If you don't watch out, someone will hear you talking to me and you'll be cocooned for a year. Like Thorson. He was like you—he didn't understand.'

'I would like to understand—learn more about you.'

'Oh, be quiet! I've done enough talking...'

'You are a mystery,' I accused. 'I would like to know why Thorson did not understand you.'

She yawned. 'The less you know about me, the better, Selac. As for Thorson—I thought he was taking me to a luxury planet. Oh, I led him on and planned to dodge him later. But look where I've landed—a geological heap—a quarry—'

'This is a very interesting place,' I said indignantly.

'Not to me...'

'You're not truly absorbed by metal-bearing lava—by gas stratas?' I asked incredulously.

'It leaves me cold...'

'Are all women like you?'

The return of angry lines to her lovely face fascinated me. The way her lips twisted was so strange. 'Women! Boy, this has made some impact on you, hasn't it? Sex rears its ugly head on Tract 23/04B! No—all women are not like me. Ha! Ha! That really is amusing...'

'I would like to learn more about women. Quite seriously. I have so many questions to ask. For instance, why are you dressed so tantalisingly?'

'I suppose because I want to be—tantalising...'

I frowned and muttered: 'I've always known only uniforms and alien life-forms. Well—another point; could you really produce a child—a replica of me? This fact seems tremendously interesting.'

She turned angrily on the couch. 'Oh, you absolute idiot! God help you lot from Infinite Worlds if you ever get to Earth. There are millions of women there, darling, and they'd make you look pretty silly. You'd probably go crazy—or run in terror. Now shut up—I'm tired...'

I might have pursued my inquiries but I heard a sound from the corridor. Someone was patrolling. I froze, listened to receding footsteps and pondered the grim consequences of transgressing against the Statutes. When I turned to Lalee again, I discovered she was sound asleep.

I watched her for a long time. Then impelled by something more than mere curiosity, I reached out a hand to lightly touch her softly rising and falling breasts.

Some warning penetrated her sleeping mind and her eyes suddenly opened and blazed anger at me. The look was so intense that I backed to the other side of the cubicle and, over the next few minutes, watched her slide back into slumber.

I sat for a long time, baffled, perturbed by the enigma of this woman, shaken by this utterly new concept of beauty, the live, nearly bare length of her. Until now such wonderment had been reserved for new worlds, unusual technical problems, onslaughts on almost impossible terrain.

I sat and dozed and dreamed wild fantasies and at the end of the short night I fully awakened. I got to my feet and took in the empty couch, the pang of emptiness. Lalee had gone.

In the glaring morning I had duties to perform; a session of subject cramming with audio plugs in my ears and a subliminal video beaming instructions into my eyes. I could not escape the class-room for at least forty terms. I sat it out, plugged in, receptive, although my brain whirled with mental visions of Lalee and crystalloid formations. When I at last plunged into the white light outside, I stared at the silent spaceship, remembering that Lalee had said she would leave with it.

How would she do that? If she walked into the ship just

before take off, the Search Officers would see her and she might be cocooned as punishment.

I was tempted to talk over with Cordo, a fellow officer and good friend, the extraordinary mental duress that this woman had created in my mind. Yet that could be foolish; even Cordo with his widely ranging intelligence might not understand.

So I was alone. I brooded, pondered. I walked restlessly around the depot, looking for her. I became angry with myself, bewildered, when my searches proved completely negative. How could this woman hide, avoid capture on terrain so unsympathetic to her. So she had vanished again! Had she found a hole in the ground, like some rodent?

Never in all my life had I been so mentally disturbed. I yeamed wildly to see Lalee, then, alternately, I was angry with her. I could not stay in one place. I moved around, unhappy, sure that I'd encounter her somewhere, in hiding, no doubt. I returned to my cubicle. Of course, she was not there and I stared at my three-dimensional reflection in a gas-mirror and straightened my Infinite Worlds scarf and cap. I went out again, walking erectly. I stared once more at the serene spaceship and noted that the hatches were still sealed. There was a lot of time yet to lift-off. But by then I would have to parade into a hover and take part in an excursion into the lava fields.

During my futile wandering I saw Cordo and waved to him. Then the Pater crossed my path and I saluted firmly with the precision our leaders of authority expected. Then once more I saw the private, the young stranger who wore the greyish, undefinable tunic. As he walked lithely across my path, he flashed me the friendly grin I'd seen earlier.

Even a conditioned mind, trained to absorb nothing but one subject, geological fact, can dart into the unaccountable. Lalee had projected me into new spheres of awareness, initially, and my mind, honed by new experience, tuned to the presence of this young man.

I watched him walk into the restaurant, disappear. Slowly, I followed. My new perceptions urged me on, a reflex alien to my normal thought-patterns of work and training.

The battery of food-producers doled out nutriment in a variety of forms, hot or cold, vegetable, fish, meat or liquid. Close behind him as he stabbed at buttons and held out a dish, I murmured: 'Hello—Infinite Worlds don't allow many privates on their worlds. Are you on Construction?'

'Ah—yes.' Once more the flashing smile.

'Must be the tunnel. The borers take some watching, I believe?'

'They do.'

'Tract 23/04B is being sold to a subterranean people—human worms, I've been told. You'll be busy for a long time.'

'I should imagine so. Heavens, this machine food doesn't look very appetising!'

'It's very nourishing,' I protested, and my gaze dropped to the plate he was holding.

Two flashing rings on one hand winked a cruel medley of colours on to the retina of my eyes.

'Where did you get them?' I snapped.

'What are you talking about?'

'The rings! Who gave them to you?'

'They belong—to a woman I know...'

'That is impossible,' I said. 'There are no women within a million light-years—' And then I halted. 'I mean I have

seen those rings before! So she gave them to you. You! Why?

'Just go away—please!' hissed the young private.

'Why you?' I demanded huskily. 'Why should she give them to you? You will tell me or—'

'You're a damned nuisance,' lippled the young man. 'Get to hell away from me!'

He almost dropped his plate in his hurry to get away from me. His swift, practically gliding run, with such small strides, took him to the other side of the restaurant. A few officers, sampling the food-producers, turned capped heads and it was their curiosity, minimal but definite, that deterred me and allowed the young man to make his getaway.

Outside, again, I stared at the glaring landscape, eyes narrowed behind my protective glasses.

I had recognised Lalee's rings! No one could possibly persuade me that those intricate little clusters of wicked gems were not the ones I had last seen on Lalee's fingers.

It came, another new emotion—a burning resentment against the young private. Why should Lalee give him her rings? What had he done for her to deserve this honour? Had he provided a hiding-place for her—was that it? With a dull fury that made me forget about my duties and the excursion into the lava fields, I moved restlessly again, walking towards the cubicle block.

I suddenly hated the stranger. This reaction arose despite years of instruction on the need for cooperation between officers and the nil-value of personal feelings.

So he knew lovely Lalee! He was protecting her! If the Search Officers got him, it would serve him right!

I suppose when a man moves without thought he instinctively returns to base. I came to my cubicle; used my key on the magnetic door. I heard it click protestingly; the door was already open.

I suppose I half-guessed she'd be there. She decorated the couch, the filmy negative dress a pale background to her technicolour body. The soft smile beckoned me, linked in irresistible appeal with bare welcoming arms.

'Why, Selac, how nice to see you again!'

'Where have you been?' I paused. Irridescence glinted a reminder. 'You've got your rings back.'

'Let me stay here, Selac, until the spaceship is ready for lift off. You're the only friend I've got in this awful place...'

'What about the private?'

'Oh, forget him, Selac. Promise you'll let me stay until I can get on the spaceship...'

'You will be caught,' I said sternly.

'Oh, leave that to me! Just say I'll be all right here, darling Selac...'

I nodded hurriedly. Then foolish words: 'Yes—yes—Lalee! Anything! Just anything for you, Lalee. I'll help you. I wish you could stay for ever!'

'You know that is ridiculous!' she mocked. 'On this rock? With rock-men? Geologist zombies! I can't get back to the rich worlds fast enough!'

'I could come with you—'

'Good God, have I driven you mad? Oh, dear, I wish I was on the ship, ready for lift-off...'

A magnetic door is utterly silent in operation. Only a

fast waft of air on the nape of my neck told me that the door had been flung open with maximum speed. That and the subsequent voices.

'Get him!'

'That's him—the woman...'

'A Herm!' said Pater with final authority. His greysish face was a mask. 'It was a good deduction when I learnt that the ship had called at Hermes. That devilish planet has a colony of the changelings. It's on Earthian Records. Watch her—him—don't let him escape—'

'We won't,' said a Search Officer.

'We can't have feminine contamination,' said Pater.

Lalee's cry of rage was at first a high-pitched scream, the wail of a woman in distress. Then the vibrations changed pitch as the Search Officers grabbed her arms and the voice ran into low masculine snarl. Pater held up a warning hand at me as I started forward. I stopped and sucked at breath.

I watched the lovely shape of Lalee writhe like a soul in torment; sensual, provocative, right through a range of feminine physical contortions. Then the soft flesh hardened, changed muscular structure, became ribbed with hard tendon. As the voice rasped into male, vocal protest, the soft breasts vanished and hips seemed to narrow. The man appeared out of the changeling body. The hair straightened and lost its glowing sheen. As the red lips thinned, the now hard body fought like a man.

'When you didn't report to the hover, we considered something was wrong, Officer Karn,' Pater spoke conclusively. 'An officer is never absent.'

I hardly listened. My disbelieving eyes were fixed in horror upon Lalee—the young stranger. Lalee—the private! The vision who was now no more!

'Men-women from Hermes,' said Pater. 'They're Hermaphrodites, if you must learn the unspeakable, Officer Karn. Bi-sexual changelings. They do not mate but reproduce their kind within themselves.'

The young private freed an arm; tried to wipe the gems from his eyebrows. I saw the fatal rings glint again, and I closed my eyes and stood rigidly.

'It was easy for this creature to vanish,' said Pater. 'She changed into her man-self. No one was looking for a man. But apparently she turned her terrible influence on you, Officer Karn, to suit her purposes. Probably she—or he—would have boarded the spaceship as a man. In any case, we are not cocooning this terrible creature. She will be deported.'

I opened my eyes. The changeling suddenly danced into a mocking contortion; eased into soft flesh again, a female shape with curves that jiggled. In seconds I saw the lovely Lalee again, with glowing hair and taunting red lips and eyes that smiled an invitation. The false image twitched again as muscular spasms altered the body and Lalee was once more the angry man.

For the second time I shut my eyes in an effort to erase the vision. Pater's cold denunciation was almost a relief.

'As for you, Officer Karn, naturally you will be punished and sent to the outer limits of Infinite Worlds. You will never see a woman or the semblance of these infamous creatures again.'

Momentarily, as it sank into the brain lobes behind my unseeing eyes, I wished I had been condemned to instant death.



REVONES.



CASSANDRA'S CASTLE

by Lee Harding

Consider Conrad's folly.

She was the richest and most beautiful woman in the known universe—or so the story goes.

Her father's empire spanned more star systems than the ships of the Imperial Terran Space Navy cared to police. The ruthless expansion of his gargantuan business enterprises had condoned every malpractice that the mind of man could devise, and he had accumulated more wealth and power than any individual in the whole of recorded history.

Yet he harboured no love for his fellow creatures. They had grovelled for his favours for centuries, trying to grab for themselves a modicum of the vast fortune he had wrung from a hostile universe, and he loathed the writhings of their miserable little minds.

He despised all the dark things he had discovered within himself, but he loved his fair daughter, Cassandra, more than all his worldly wealth and magnificence. Bright blossom of a disastrous early marriage, she had soon become

the beautiful blonde harvest which had eased the aftermath of that desolate union. Throughout her tragically short childhood he had showered her with gifts and lavished his lonely affections upon her dazzling innocence. He transported her from one corner of the inhabited universe to another, filling her hungry young mind with the most marvellous things he could find, leading her into one gay adventure after another, and never realising how much more her bewildered young eyes really saw. She was his fairy-tale princess, his daughter, the avatar of all his delights, the soul to which he cleaved when he sought refuge from the many scourges that pursued his immortal life.

When she reached her majority, and was enjoined into the eternal springtime of her immeasurably long lifetime, he showered her with planets for playthings and empires of her own to administer. For a while she amused herself with these faceless little mannikins and their pointless lives, but eventually—and, perhaps, inevitably—she grew weary of

these pastimes. When she had been a gullible child the galaxy had seemed endless and its treasures inexhaustible; now she was a woman and embarked upon a long voyage of immortality, this no longer seemed tenable.

She was heirless to the greatest single fortune that the universe had ever known. She was beautiful and much sought after by the young men of her station. Her presence had graced more Imperial and Managerial balls than any other woman of her time. She was feted and acclaimed, pursued and discussed, her every movement the gossip concern of the jaded minds of the galaxy. The insatiable lenses of the newsmedias followed her everywhere and documented her whirlwind existence. But she could—when ever she wished—eliminate their pursuit with a commanding wave of her hand; anonymity was hers whenever she wished, for the resources behind her father were enormous, and everything and everybody had its price.

Her lovers were many, but none of them had conquered the icy citadel of her heart, for she had discovered, much to her despair, that, along with all her worldly possessions, her soul was held in thrall by an aching, intolerable loneliness. But, because she possessed incalculable wealth, she found ways to circumvent this distraction... for a while. And in the meantime she grew remote and disenchanted, separated from every joy the galaxy could provide by the wealth and power she had inherited.

She was ninety-seven years old when Conrad Rayner saw her for the first time. Disappointment and loneliness had hardened her once fragile beauty into an icy strangeness that few young men thought it advantageous to lay siege to. But the instant his dazed and dazzled eyes alighted upon her he knew that he was hopelessly in love.

He had adored her from a distance for many years—and what virile young man of his time hadn't? He had followed her image backwards and forwards across the galaxy a thousand times, watching the newsmedias in a state of trance and drinking in the breath-taking beauty of her three-dimensional image. But not even these occasions had prepared him for the awesome reality of her self.

They had met back home, on Old Earth, at the Imperial Ball of 'One Thirty-Five. From the moment when she had first swept into the main hall, trailing her gay entourage behind her like a widespread, chattering sail, a spell seemed to have been cast over the assemblage. A sudden hush had descended upon the guests, to be followed almost immediately by a tumultuous welcome.

She moved as though she owned the universe, and she very nearly did; a dazzling vision dressed in a scarlet sheath that displayed her magnificent body to the hungry eyes of all the eager young in the room. Tall, feathered plumes swept up from her shoulders and swooped down from her waist and swirled magnificently as she moved imperiously from one excited group of people to the next. Clearways opened for her as if in honour of her passage, yet there was an element of disdain in her manner that she was not entirely successful in hiding. This, more than anything else, drew her to Conrad, for he disliked—with passionate intensity—these very same qualities in the brittle society he was forced to pay lip service to.

Several times she passed so close to him that he might have reached out and touched her beautifully sculptured flesh. But she did not know him personally and tonight, and for all these bothersome special occasions, her personal privacy field was of such intensity that only a few immediate and very close friends were allowed through to enjoy

the cold grace of her company.

Occasionally he caught her eye, and made as if to join her, but there was no welcoming smile on her face, and the gentle, unseen pressure of her privacy field pressed against his mind with an almost antagonistic displeasure. She did not share his earnest desire to converse.

And why should she? Was he so much more handsome, with his sleek and saturnine good looks, than a hundred other men she had known, whose hands had been permitted to rove and gain entry to her fabulous body?

Feeling scorned and humiliated, he had left the festivities early.

His brain was on fire. He was determined to have her. But not for a handful of stormy evenings. For always. If he could manage it. And he would, *He must*.

There was no room in his lascivious nature to contemplate the nature of his desire. He only knew that he was madly in love for the first time in his life and that, beside her, every woman he had ever known looked drab and commonplace.

So he courted her. From one world to another, across the universe and back again in an endless quest to win her affection.

He was, some said, the finest astrosculptor of his time, and his followers were dazzled by the works he created and left behind in an effort to impress the woman of his dreams.

He designed and developed worlds so beautiful that they brought tears to his eyes—and gave them to her for trinkets. He rekindled a shrunken old dwarf star and swung fresh new worlds into graceful orbits around the dazzling sun he had created, and named the system *Cassandra* in her honour. And still she ignored his spectacular advances.

The inquisitive eyes of the galaxy followed their courtship. Enormous sums were wagered upon the outcome of his suit. Would the flamboyant and talented Conrad Rayner persuade the beautiful princess to enter into wedlock—or would she spurn him as a weak and penniless adventurer?

The odds were even. Cassandra's legendary wealth was more than equalled by the young artist's creative prowess and the adulation of his followers. Cassandra's fortune eliminated any thought of parity with any other human wealth and the barren nature of her existence had made her seek the companionship of others more talented than herself, as if, by this process, she could negate some of her terrible loneliness.

Cassandra was nearly a quarter of a century older than her determined suitor. Conrad, on the other hand, had only recently been admitted to the ruling immortal hierarchy of the galaxy and was not yet disenchanted with the life he had found there. He lacked finesse and, some said, good taste, and—worst of all—good timing. But even his most forceful critics had to admit that he had style in abundance, and perhaps it was this combination of freshness and exuberance—and, most of all, his *youthfulness*—that finally won her hand.

She allowed him to pursue her for three long years before she capitulated. Time was a cheap commodity to members of the elite, and the long chase helped to enliven the otherwise dull routine of her life.

The galaxy roared its approval.

Conrad left his bride-to-be to arrange her wedding preparations and disappeared into the depths of the galaxy,

where no newsmedia could find him.

He sought an aged planet wandering around a comfortable G-type star near the galactic rim and happily set about transforming it into a wedding gift for his beautiful Cassandra. He poured the essence of himself—and his craft—into creating a dazzling world of water, arranged a deliciously temperate climate, and filled the great ocean with a variety of benign sea creatures. Over all this he spread an arrangement of tiny, floating islands that moved slowly every which-way as the whim of the tides dictated, and, for a finishing touch, he had several doddering old worlds towed from another section of space, and had them carefully disintegrated and pushed the resulting debris into permanent position above the equator, so that his bride might look up whenever she wished and find a glorious rainbow halo girdling their world.

It was a magnificent creation; his masterpiece and his wedding gift to Cassandra. And when everything was finished and set in order, he flew quickly back to the centre of the galaxy.

Her father saw to it that their wedding was a prodigious occasion. After the nuptials had been celebrated there began a party such as the civilised worlds had never seen the like of, and scarcely would again. And for a finale great suns were detonated far out in space and brought the gigantic jewels of bright new novas into the already delirious heavens, and many new worlds were sown in the light they shed. Two mighty star systems were pulled together so that, commingling they created a magnificent new constellation in the shape of her father's business emblem—and on the primordial worlds that danced around these suns mindless animals groaned and died as the monstrous stresses tore them apart for the glory of a king's daughter.

But well before all this was over Conrad and his bride had fled from the tumultuous reception her father had decreed. He set their lavishly equipped star-ship on course for the secret haven he had fashioned for his bride and turned happily to Cassandra.

Her hand—long and white, accustomed to determining the direction of things—closed over the controls. 'No,' she whispered, a far away look in her dark eyes, 'not *there*. I don't want to go *there*.'

He looked surprised. A slight irritation discoloured his answer. 'But my dear...'

And then he understood. He had intended his dazzling wedding gift to be a surprise, the apotheosis of all the beautiful things he had lavished upon her during their courtship. But nothing could be kept secret from Cassandra—not even *this*. Her spies were like the eyes of Argus and they saw everything, everywhere.

'I wish to go to the castle,' she said. Her voice was subdued but it carried the strength of a rich, dark wine.

He looked at her strangely. 'To your castle—on our honeymoon?'

It was an archaic but affectionate custom that the human race, out of need for such things, had sought to preserve.

She smiled, but the expression lacked warmth. 'A quaint institution, Conrad. But really, such a bore, with all those newspeeps watching...'

So they would hasten, instead, to the seclusion of her private retreat from the world. Her castle was the only place in the galaxy where she could retire and know that she was completely alone. Only Cassandra knew the location of the castle and she guarded that secret more jealously than any of her other possessions.

He shrugged, and nodded his agreement. 'Very well, then, my dear. The castle it shall be.' And he leaned forward to kiss her politely on the cheek as she tapped out the secret co-ordinates that would send their powerful ship hurrying out to the edge of the universe.

Her flesh was surprisingly cold.

While their minds drifted somewhere in the blissful long-sleep that protected their fragile personalities from the dangers of hyperspace travel, the star-ship spun out towards the sparsely populated area of the galactic rim. When it broached normal space/time again they found the great swirling lens of the galaxy had condensed into a fiery coal behind them, and only a few wan stars clung tenaciously to these lonely shoals.

Conrad felt uneasy. His mind was unaccustomed to dealing with so much loneliness and he was thankful that they had each other. But what had possessed her to bring their ship to such a desolate spot?

The isolation did not seem to worry Cassandra. There were times when her life seemed to be compounded of one insane convulsion after another, an endless treadmill of administrative dinners and jaded amorous encounters, each one more predictable than the last. At such times she craved the isolation of her castle and the chance to be herself. It was a means whereby she could rediscover what sort of creature she really was.

The tiny planet swung suddenly out of space and confronted them. Cassandra laughed at Conrad's surprise and explained how it was shielded from prying eyes and only acknowledged the emanations of her mind. From everyone else it was safely hidden. Only her presence could make it snap so eagerly into focus upon the ship's sensors.

The castle had been keyed for a sombre arrival. At other times it might have leapt into space with a dazzling display of brightness, a tiny world burning like a welcoming beacon against the cold black gulf of inter-galactic space, but on this occasion there was nothing festive about the world that welcomed them, and that struck Conrad as a distinct disappointment.

As their ship descended towards the dark world Conrad could see the ramparts of a real castle rising up out of the featureless plain like the crooked talons of a great metal fist. The sight of this grotesque apparition—and the weight of so much unaccustomed loneliness pressing down upon him—gave him some misgivings. Perhaps his bride was weary of pomp and ceremony, but wasn't this taking solitude to an extreme?

But as their ship dropped closer towards the castle this image softened. The forbidding contours of the tormented spires flowed into swelling buttresses and domed minarets. A faint glow suffused the nearby horizon, a gentle bluish luminescence suggesting a token atmosphere had been summoned into existence. A number of low-orbiting moonlets lumbered into view, fanciful little mechanisms weaving a slow and intricate pattern of movements through the night-dark sky high overhead, as though they were lazily stitching the universe together.

The galactic lens dropped out of sight behind the planetoid. Only the mischievous light provided by the satellites illuminated the landscape below. But the bluish radiance was growing, and reaching up to embrace the darkness of outer space.

Conrad looked curiously at his bride. Surprisingly, her face had softened. Instead of the glacial princess he had

known he saw a woman, warm and provocative. Feeling the weight of his attention, she turned towards him, and smiled. It was a touching moment.

Wordlessly, he took her gently in his arms and kissed her. She returned his affection like the timeless moving of a glacier, and underneath this exterior he could already detect the first faint movements of something deep and profound. He was thrown a little off guard by this unexpected discovery; he had not been prepared for such unfamiliar depths.

Colourful pennants swung listlessly from the castle walls, stirred by some nameless breeze begat by their arrival. The ghostly blue nimbus of light glowed on the horizon and around the domed minarets of the building.

Their star-ship settled. The castle spread wide a gaping entry-port and extruded a wide, sloping ramp some distance out on to the plain. They made a gentle landing upon this cushioned tarmac. Still locked dreamily in each other's arms, they watched the ramp flow and transform itself into a gigantic hand that drew them carefully inside the castle.

Their ship was deposited inside the castle's hangar and the hand suffused itself into the flesh-coloured mosaic of the floor. Somewhere a distant motor hummed itself into silence and all was still.

Cassandra led him out of the hangar and into an enormous hallway. The walls, Conrad observed, had been modelled in stonework and soared up a dizzying distance before they reached the ceiling the effect of perspective was dazzling. At the far end of the long room a flight of stone steps led up either side to where an austere throned dais overlooked the hall. Behind this, to the right, was a narrow, curtained doorway.

But nothing, of course, was as it seemed.

The only illumination was provided by enormous torches set into the stonework high-up along the walls, at equally spaced intervals, their long flames flickering in the vagarious drafts. The floor was bare, the heavy stone paving bricks polished by the movements of many feet. It was deathly quiet, save for a haunting susurrus of melody—it sounded like a group of stringed instruments being delicately plucked—that wove its way down from the curtained room behind the royal dais.

It was an interesting reconstruction.

Smiling, Cassandra took his hand and led him towards the steps at the far end of the hallway.

But he prevaricated. 'Wait...' he suggested. The eerie strangeness of the castle fascinated him.

Her hand slipped from his. He looked up and his eyes tried again to scale the dizzying heights of the walls. In the flickering light of the torches the distant ceiling seemed to be made up of the chequered patterns of stained glass, but the light was so poor that it was difficult to distinguish individual patterns. But it seemed to Conrad that the ceiling was a fractured mosaic of colours, of individual faces fragmented and inextricably woven together. And the eyes of all these stricken faces looked down, and studied him.

'Conrad...'

His name on her lips had the power to break any spell he cast over himself. He blinked and looked away from the haunting mosaic.

She was standing half-way up the flight of stairs on his left. She had thrown away her beautiful golden robe and now stood before him in a deep mauve nightdress; it fell down from her waist but left her arms and shoulders bare, and her magnificent breasts free to nestle in the deep

purple ruffles that rose from her waist and crept up round her beautiful white throat. Her arms were raised and reaching out for him. The expression of aching loneliness in her eyes transfixed him.

Her beauty dazzled him anew.

'Cassandra...' He hurried forward like an anxious child. They met, and clung together—briefly—while he drank in the physical manifestation of her beauty, and then he followed her slowly up the steps and through the curtained doorway where the languorous music waited.

But he paused for a moment and looked back the way they had come.

He saw the great hall decked out in oriental splendour. The walls were made of hammered gold and great windows, draped with enormous multi-coloured curtains, opened out upon blinding sunlight. The floor was polished ivory inlaid with complex patterns and pictures; it was covered with luxurious rugs and many low, circular tables. Numerous divans and armchairs were arranged along the two main walls and, at the far end, a great open archway suggested a suitable entrance for the arrival of guests magnificent in their panoply. He smelled the delicious odour of incense and his ears fancied a distant dodecaphonic music and the merry sound of laughing girls.

He grinned and crushed Cassandra to him. Her inventiveness fascinated him. They pushed through the curtained doorway. Only for a moment did they appear to stand in a small, darkened room heavy with incense and the promise of sweet music, and then it expanded as the castle, empathic to Cassandra's unspoken thoughts, contrived to provide them with the circumstances she desired.

They seemed to stand on the threshold of an enormous chasm. Cassandra gave a rapturous cry and leapt forward, her gown spreading out around her like the wings of an exultant bird. Her body sailed out, weightless, into a twilight void that seemed to know no limits. Conrad cried out, joyfully, and leapt after her. Their bodies jostled effortlessly together. The walls of the room had disappeared now into an anonymous golden mist. Above them he sensed a tantalisingly close dome of blue that suggested a warm sky close to sunset, and below their whirling bodies they could hear the soft, tinkling sounds of water splashing over some unseen rocks.

The music had faded away and been forgotten. The only important sounds were the words they spoke and whispered to each other, the only meaningful activity the movements they made together in this room without any end.

He cradled her in his arms and told her of his love. And she listened, and smiled, and wondered if he would be like all the others, or if this time she might break the cruel fate that held her in thrall. But she listened, and moaned softly to herself.

She led him in the dance of love, while the unseen walls of the room began to gradually fold in upon them, until they seemed to be drifting together inside the warm and benevolent cavity of an enormous womb, where the sounds of their breathing were intensified and the intent of their every small movements made plain their purpose. The golden glow that had encased them disappeared. Below, a fierce orange fire pulsed like a yearning heart and made weird patterns of light in the darkness that surrounded them. The light inflamed their bodies. They moved away from each other in ever widening circles.

The dance continued, and the orange glow grew fiercer, until they swung close together and he could read the dark

hunger in her eyes and touch her swollen breasts. And she took his hand, and showed him where a magical clasp was hidden, and her gown unwound itself into his fingers and dropped away. She smiled, and her body arched away from him, coiling and uncoiling in the strange light that consumed them, her long blonde hair spreading out all around her, weightlessly, a glowing nimbus stained red by the rising intensity of the growing fire underneath them.

Absolute wealth and absolute power had left no visible marks upon her magnificent body. If there had been any corruption then the signs lay elsewhere.

He unclasped his fingers. The mauve nightdress with the beautiful bunched ruffles slipped away from him and began a slow, spiralling descent towards the throbbing orb below.

Like twin bodies orbiting a fierce and unrepentant sun they pursued each other around the room, until their bodies fused suddenly together and began to explore the nature of their passion. The wandering strands of her long blonde hair spread out and wrapped around them like the weaving coils of a Medusa, holding their entwined limbs together in a cage of gold.

They whirled, and slept, and made love again: two people locked together in a passionate embrace in a lonely castle on the edge of the universe; and when they woke at last from their night of love they found, not surprisingly, that nothing had changed, that they were still strangers to each other, and that they had embarked upon an odyssey that might lead, inevitably, to boredom and disappointment for them both.

But in the disenchanted game of the galaxy, some enterprises cried out to be ventured.

It was, perhaps, unfortunate that Cassandra was a born loser.

For the first few days of their idyll they were much too occupied with each other to have need of anything else. Cassandra had crammed the riotous living and escapades of three normal lifetimes into her immortal self and Conrad—no stranger himself to the more perverse pleasures of the universe—was delighted with her expertise. But as time passed and he became more or less accustomed to her moods and desires, he began to notice some peculiarities about the castle that might otherwise have escaped his attention.

He found its personality ambiguous, as if the designer had been unable to settle upon a suitable motif, or unable to cope with the capricious whims of his customer. The place was never constant. It seemed to be consumed by a restless urge to change itself, as though it couldn't bear to maintain any one shape for more than a few moments of time. It could be, in turn, benevolent and then cruel, amorous and indifferent and, at times, even threatening, as though the mistress herself had been unable to decide what sort of companion she wished to commit empathy with.

As an engineering feat the castle was quite remarkable. But Conrad was unmoved by mechanical contrivances, however clever; and besides, he had become accustomed to seeing people with Cassandra's wealth accomplish anything. He sometimes wondered if the person who had designed the castle had maliciously chosen its wayward personality to compliment Cassandra's own vagaries of mind.

No room remained stable for more than an hour. The sudden shifts of environment were initially disturbing and difficult to cope with, but in time he adapted. Like everything else about his bride's little world, he discovered it was

best not taken too seriously.

In spite of the bewildering fluctuations of its mood and appearance, the castle catered to all their demands, vocal and subconscious, and the cold dark hell beyond the castle was uninviting. Yet he knew he would ultimately tire of this retreat.

'Why did you build your castle so far away?' he asked. It was late evening by the synthetic time that governed this place, and they had been in bed for some time.

'To be alone,' she answered.

'But why so far? Surely you could have concealed something much closer to the hub and ...'

She had stirred in his arms and moved away. She moved away from the bed and stood in the darkness before an ornate window that looked out over most of the castle. The shifting light from the weaving moonlets wove a pattern over the foreboding landscape outside and limned the contours of her body.

He did not follow her movements, but was content to study her thus from a distance. 'Don't you find it lonely, then?'

She let her head tilt back slightly so that the moons danced upon the rich curve of her throat. In the twilight zone between the moonlight and utter darkness he thought her face had become a grinning mask.

'No more lonely than it is... back there,' she said quietly, without looking at him. 'To be lonely by oneself is one thing, but to be lonely among a billion smiling people is another thing entirely. That is why I come here—to find out which is worst.'

She turned towards him. He could not read her expression in the half-light.

'Don't you feel it?' she said. 'How small all *that* seems, now that we're *here*? We've put a whole galaxy behind us, but have we lost so much? And isn't the castle our world now that we are in it?'

Her words perplexed him. He was not accustomed to mid-night philosophy. He held out his arms. 'Come to bed.'

She dallied a moment longer, as though reluctant to surrender herself entirely to his company. Later, they lay quietly together and in a short while they were fast asleep.

Conrad's last conscious thought was the dreamy feeling that the room was crowding in on them and that galleries of ghosts were picking at their thoughts.

In the morning Cassandra took him hunting.

To comply with her requirements the outside landscape was bathed by a powerful sunlight beamed down from an energy bank high up in the soft blue sky. The barren, airless plain had given way to the coarse outcroppings and the dense, faded undergrowth of a Terran veldt.

Conrad dutifully followed his bride out of the castle.

She wore an all-purpose symbiotic sheath which had arranged itself so that it fitted snugly to the contours of her superb body, but left most of her flesh bare to soak up the warmth from the artificial sun. On the other hand, his own sheath had transformed itself into a tight-fitting one-piece safari suit that covered him from neck to toe. It was hot out on the veldt and already he was sweating. He cursed the sheath and wondered if this was another of Cassandra's little jokes. It certainly showed no eagerness to conform to his requirements.

Their only motive power—apart from their legs—was provided by two ancient jetpacks strapped to their shoulders, and their only weapons were a couple of antique

handguns. Cassandra liked the odds to be adventurous so that the carnivores stood some sort of chance.

Conrad had consented to this nonsense half-heartedly. Illusory hunting had never been his forte. The pursuit of phantom creatures bored him, as did all pointless activity, but he was prepared to indulge his beautiful bride in her fancies.

Cassandra led them some distance away from the castle before she activated her jetpack. She soared into the sky and began weaving and swooping low across the tall dry grass that undulated gently underneath her, like an ocean responding to a swell.

Conrad jetted after her. Behind them the castle shimmered and shrank to the size of a crude and lumpy native *kraal* and became part of the general landscape.

He was in no hurry to match her speed or emulate her wild aerobatics, but contented himself by keeping a respectable distance between them. He had come to watch, not to kill, and to enjoy the spectacle she carved through the sky.

Below her the grass heaved suddenly and a magnificent tawny animal broke cover and roared defiance. Cassandra wheeled and swept to the ground. She landed with her feet braced wide apart and facing the charging lion.

So my darling likes the big cats, Conrad mused. He dropped lower to watch the confrontation from a better angle.

The enraged animal bore down upon the waiting Cassandra, for no apparent reason other than because it had been programmed to attack. It raced towards her like fury, great mouth opened wide and roaring, its wicked teeth bared for the kill.

Cassandra coolly stood her ground and raised her antique weapon. She took careful aim, the ghost of a smile disfiguring her face, and pressed the trigger.

The handgun roared and the lion's head disintegrated. But the savage momentum kept the mutilated body thundering forward. Cassandra stepped nimbly aside and let it plough to a halt almost at her feet. The headless carcase twitched once or twice and then was still. For a while blood pumped from the headless torso and formed a muddied pool on the dry ground. Cassandra relaxed and checked her handgun thoughtfully.

Conrad glided down and stood beside her. 'Well taken, my love.'

She shrugged, as if it had all been terribly easy, and, indeed, from his vantage point, it had certainly looked that way. But he made no comment on the ease with which she had made her kill. The blood looked very convincing.

Cassandra moved off through the tall grass at a steady, confident pace. Conrad sighed and took off after her. At places the waving grass rose high above their heads and concealed them from each other. If a beast came charging at either of them through the dense undergrowth then they would be unable to see it until the last split-second.

This happened several times to his bride, but she was never caught off-guard. Sometimes Conrad lost her completely to the forest of grass and he had to jet up high to find her. But she did not seem to mind. She had usurped the role of the archetypal huntress and was lost in her sport, oblivious to her companion.

For most of the morning Conrad trailed behind her while she killed one magnificent beast after another; her appetite seemed insatiable. He watched the tension gradually unwind itself from out of her beautiful body and saw

the fierce light of the kill transform the glacial insularity of her face into something deep and tumescent. He longed to possess her again.

'Jaded, my darling?' She flung the question casually over one shoulder, her eyes flickering with mischief. She had just completed her fifteenth kill and was beginning to warm to the hunt. 'Does my thirst for pleasure bore you?'

'No,' he lied. 'But I have nothing against the big cats.'

Her eyes flashed. He had never seen her look so cruel or so inviting. A little pique entered the conversation. 'Then you do not like my game?'

Conrad had been about to say that he had nothing, personally against illusory hunts, when commonsense demanded that he keep his mouth shut. He had no wish to offend or anger her. After all, she was his wife. For better or worse; the old adage still held some meaning.

But she already knew him well enough to gauge his feelings. She rose up before him and prouetted cheekily in the sky, suddenly daring and mischievous. 'Well, if you don't really fancy my sort of game, my darling,' she chided, 'then perhaps we might try something else...'

Before he had time to frame an answer in his defence the landscape darkened and altered shape. Within the space of a few short seconds total darkness had enveloped them.

Conrad swore. But already he could feel the cold, sodden arms of a primeval forest reaching out for him and pressing against his limbs. The only light was a fitful glow that filtered down through the tightly packed branches overhead; they were locked together like the jealous fingers of an ogre.

It was raining; a steady drizzle sifting down through the dank forest. A chill wind circulated every which-way around him, and somewhere in the distance he could hear the sombre roll of thunder. He tried to move but branches tore at his unprotected face. He whimpered—briefly—at this unforseen abuse of his precious body. Lightning flashed above the twisted trees and illuminated for a moment the small clearing where he stood. The sky rumbled balefully and the rainfall increased. Already he was soaked to the skin.

'Cassandra?'

He called her name but she did not come forward.

'Cassandra?'

Only the unpleasant sounds of the forest pressed in upon him.

Little fool. So she wanted to play games? Well, he was becoming accustomed to the vagaries of the reality apparatus which his wife loved to play with, juggling and adjusting her planetary environment to suit the whims of her prevailing mood. But this was the first time she had gone out of her way to make him feel uncomfortable. Perhaps there was a sadistic streak in her nature he had only just uncovered...and must learn to exploit to his own advantage.

'Cassandra—where are you? What game is this? What am I supposed to do? Cassandra—answer me. Cassandra?'

For reply he heard the anxious passage of the moist wind moving through the twisted trees, howling like a lost animal, and a long roll of thunder shrugged its unconcerned way above the tree-tops: all that and the steady fall of the rain and, somewhere distant, a tinkle of amused laughter.

All right—so she wanted to play.

But he was not amused.

Angrily, he swung around, looking for some way out of the crowded forest. There was a sudden, terrifying screech



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from behind him, and directly overhead. Surprised, he turned quickly around and faced the hideous beast swooping down upon him. It had a face like one of the big cats Cassandra had slaughtered and a gaping, screaming beak that looked large enough to crush his spine without any effort.

Lightning flashed and illuminated great wings beating savagely at the rain-soaked air. Conrad jetted instinctively up and away to one side, praying that he would not crack his skull on one of the overhanging branches, scrambling to raise his ancient handgun at the same time.

The gryphon screamed and tore at the space he had only recently vacated. It wheeled around upon him in demonic fury.

Oh my god, Conrad thought. Now he understood her little game. *Not where I hunt but where I am hunted...*

He fired the handgun desperately; several times. With only a few feet separating them one of the charges finally connected. The creature's screaming head disintegrated and showered him with fragments. The remainder of the body plummeted to the ground. The great wings continued flapping for some time and its great body heaved and humped itself for a while on the wet ground, and then lay still.

Shaken, Conrad hovered for a while and then descended to study his kill. In the darkness he could barely make out the huddled shape, but while he stood there and waited for his wildly-beating heart to calm down, the illumination level gradually increased until he could see details more clearly.

He sighed. 'All right, Cassandra—you can come out now. Your little joke worked. For a moment I was genuinely terrified. Okay?'

A too sudden dawn began to work its way through the trees. A soft mist began to rise from the overburdened ground and Conrad perceived his bride at last.

She was standing quite still on the other side of the clearing. Her sheath had transformed itself into a pure white gown that fell from her bare shoulders down to her feet in simple, classical folds. She held her hands loosely clasped together just below her waist and a dark red flower was pinned to her left breast. She was serene and smiling, like some pagan goddess come down to earth, and there was some evidence of amusement and satisfaction hidden deep in her dark eyes that suggested she was pleased with herself for jolting her husband out of his complacency.

Her eyes flashed and she laughed. It was a gentle, bell-like sound and it served to ease some of the tension between them.

Feeling a trifle foolish, Conrad smiled and moved around the carcass of the dead gryphon. He was on the point of sharing her amusement when he noticed the dark stains that had appeared upon the virgin white of her gown.

He froze. Their eyes met and for a moment her own wavered. Momentary confusion and uncertainty gripped her. She followed the direction of his gaze down over her body and looked with dismay at the stigmata of blood that had blossomed over her gown.

Conrad felt something wet on his face and raised one hand and wiped the blood from his cheek.

The gryphon's blood.

All down his suit as well, where the creature had showered him with fragments of its death.

Dazed, he could only stare at her. 'I... I don't understand,' he mumbled. He had never experienced a fabricated reality as tangible and tactile as this. His wife must be a

sorceress.

Sunlight flooded the forest. The trees disappeared and a desert enveloped them. A naked sun blazed down from a bare sky. Cassandra gave what might have been a sob and turned and ran towards the castle, her long hair streaming out behind her and her bare feet seeming not to feel the cruel heat of the sand.

'Cassandra...'

He ran after her.

Suddenly she remembered her jet-pack and it reappeared on her shoulders. The sheath flowed and reformed itself into the sparse uniform of the huntress. She jetted up and away from him and flew towards the castle.

It had reformed itself into the shape with the twisted battlements and, as she approached, an entryport widened and extruded a welcoming platform shaped like a gigantic hand. She landed gently upon this outstretched palm and the great, narrow fingers closed up and around her in the form of a protective cage, and drew her back inside the castle.

Conrad trudged slowly back, deep in thought. Cassandra's behaviour had disturbed him, and he wasn't at all happy with the way the morning had gone.

Only later did it occur to him that, if she wished, at any moment his bride could order the return of an airless vacuum to the arid landscape he trod.

The thought quickened his movements and made him jet the last few hundred yards to the castle.

That night Cassandra rocked and moaned in her sleep and the walls wept.

Conrad tried to rouse her from her nightmare. He pushed and prodded at her naked body but she would not wake. Her head tossed and turned from side to side, her face transfigured by the doubts that paraded through her sleeping mind, and her hands clutched like claws at the sweat-stained sheets.

Conrad pulled away. There was nothing he could do. She was too deep in empathy to be disturbed. Only when her nightmare had resolved itself would the castle find peace.

He sat on the edge of the bed and listened to his wife moaning in her sleep and marked the deep, soulful breathing of the castle as it shared her fitful dreams. Even his own body was bathed with a sympathetic sweat. The walls of the room seemed to be moving slowly in and out in the gloom, like the linings of some enormous lung.

Restless, he got up and pushed through the curtained doorway.

The main hall had stabilised itself in the austere manner in which he had first encountered it. He looked down past the dais into the great empty room.

The torchlight rose and fell feebly, in time with the deep susurrus of unsteady breathing that swept through the castle. The dark stone walls wept a dank moisture from the pores of every brick.

Conrad shivered. He had never experienced a house more thoroughly human and in rapport with its occupant than Cassandra's castle. It was uncanny the way it reacted so devotedly to her innermost thoughts. Whoever had designed and programmed the place must have been a genius, and Cassandra's dark mind complimented it to perfection.

He wished that he knew where the main control room was situated. He had had enough of Cassandra's games and would have preferred a few days together with her in a

more stable environment. Perhaps, in the morning, he might ask her if ...

Without knowing what had prompted his decision, he realised that he was walking down the long flight of stairs on his right. A sudden draught—a deeper, more tremulous sigh than any that had preceded it—sent the torches flaming high for an instant so that they cruelly accentuated the stark emptiness of the main hall.

They had been here together for many days, he realised, and yet he had never once bothered to explore the castle more thoroughly. Cassandra had seen to it that he had been kept much too occupied with her beauty and her own clever diversions to seek elsewhere for interest. But now, while she dreamed her restless dreams, was as good a time as any to explore.

He could not explain what motivated this decision. Perhaps because the hunt had unsettled him and made him want to know more about his distant wife. There was something here that could spoil their otherwise idyllic love feast, and he felt impelled to seek it out...and destroy it if necessary.

He reached the foot of the stairs and stood undecided. It was cold and clammy in the main hall; his skin felt like ice.

He ignored the main entryport and turned to his left. There, directly under the high dais, he found two small doors, one on either side.

The one on his right opened into darkness. Somewhere far away he could hear the muted sound of machinery and the soft whirr of computer technology. Down there, he knew, were the instruments of illusion whereby Cassandra accomplished her empathy scene-shifting. But it was much too dark to venture down, and he had brought no means of illumination with him. Perhaps tomorrow ...

The distant engines purred on, mocking his indecision.

The castle walls breathed deeply, crowding him. The torchlight guttered and almost disappeared. Alarmed, he crossed hurriedly to the other door and swung it open. For a moment he was greeted with an identical dark void underneath him, but while he stood there, confused, a section of the passageway in front of him began to glow. It brightened until he could make out a steep flight of steps leading down, the light rising and falling in intensity, keeping time with the slow pulse of the sleeping castle.

Conrad made up his mind and took a step forward. The faint nimbus of light advanced a similar distance and waited, impatient, for him to follow. He took another, and another, and the illumination continued to proceed him down the long flight of steps. Behind him the light fanned out for the space of several steps and then stopped.

He descended cautiously, unsure of what he would find. The glowing nimbus of light wrapped itself around him while the darkness ahead of him concealed his destination. The open doorway behind him receded into a wan half-light.

He briefly touched the narrow walls of the passageway and discovered that they, too, had a slick of moisture.

A light glowed ahead of him.

He reached the bottom of the steps and moved out into a low-ceilinged hallway only a little wider than the passageway. It was about a hundred and fifty feet long and there was a heavy steel door across the other end. He felt as though he had stepped into a dungeon.

He found six smaller doorways, three on either side. They were all heavily barred and locked and would not open to his touch. Each one carried a feeble torchlight in a

wall bracket nearby. A low, mournful keening seemed to come from behind each one.

The walls oozed moisture.

Conrad ran his hands around one of the heavy doors, looking for some simple catch that would negate the imposing latches.

His hands came away covered with blood.

Surprised, he recoiled, and looked down at his bloodied hands. He knew what he saw was an illusion and part of Cassandra's troubled dreams, but he wished he could unravel its meaning.

These walls did not weep—they bled.

He was standing in a chamber of blood.

Stunned and confused, he stumbled backwards, away from the door. He slipped and nearly fell on the blood-soaked floor as he moved back towards the steps.

The dungeon moaned softly and wept bloody tears and tried to call him back, and tell him something, but whatever truth it hoarded was jealously guarded by his sleeping bride.

He hurried back up the stairs, the feeble nimbus of illumination fleeing ahead of him up the weeping walls, and the mournful cry of the castle pursuing him like some blind, tormented animal.

Later, he stood beside the bed and looked down at his bride. She was sleeping peacefully now. Her disturbance had left her and the soft smile on her face was that of an innocent child.

The walls of the castle had ceased to weep, and slept. A soft, golden glow had begun to creep into the rooms with the promise of an early sunrise.

Conrad looked down at his unsteady hands and saw that the bloody stigmata had disappeared. He studied their stark, bony whiteness for some time before he crawled back into bed.

It was some time before he fell asleep.

In the morning he asked her about the dungeon and the six closed doors.

He did not mention the bloody stigmata that had seeped from the soulful walls and stained his own timid hands.

'What do you keep down there?' he asked, innocently.

She did not answer immediately. The room where they breakfasted was a vacillating environment, one moment as bare and delicate as the inside of an egg-shell, the next as encumbered with enough jewelled and ornamented bric-a-brac that would not have shamed an Imperial dining room; its dimensions expanded and telescoped in time with the changes in the decor, the colours and shapes of the surrounding furniture blending and changing with a rhythmic grace as the castle speeded the room through a finite number of patterns. Only the small table that separated them and the chairs underneath them remained static, although their colours changed to suit the prevailing mood.

'Confound it!' he protested. 'Can't you stabilise this place for a little while? It makes me sick in the head...' He raised one weary hand to his forehead and closed his eyes, to emphasise his point.

Cassandra eyed him coldly. A few moments later the breakfast room ground to a halt mid-way between a dainty eggshell blue compartment and chunky wooden panelling and shelves. The effect of the commingled rooms was disturbing.

Cassandra's cool eyes mocked him.

'Thank you,' he mumbled, and allowed her this mis-

chievous compromise. 'Now please tell me,' he repeated, 'what it is you keep in those rooms downstairs?'

Her sheath moved restlessly over her body, unable to fasten upon a consistent pattern. Odd bits and pieces of her flesh peeped through what looked like a ragged, restless cloth here the sharp, jutting protuberance of a rib and there a rosy pink nipple; lower still the rich curve of her hips. But it was her eyes that held his attention. He had never seen them so distant and opaque.

'Why do you ask?' she shot back.

'I feel there's something unpleasant down there. And whatever it is I'd like to get it *out* of here.' He thought it wiser not to add that he feared it was poisoning their relationship. The hunt episode had been particularly unpleasant.

She pushed aside his concern. 'Don't be such an alarmist. I had a bad dream last night, that's all. The castle reacted empathically. Nothing unusual about that.'

'I know. But it's not the empathic atmosphere I'm talking about but the solid, permanent things. There are six rooms down there, aren't there? And they are all locked and barred, aren't they? What do you keep inside them, Cassandra?'

He could see that she was on the defensive.

'Whatever is down there, Conrad, is none of your business. And I do not wish to talk about it...'

But he would not be fobbed off so easily. His curiosity had been aroused and he was determined to unmask the nature of this secret she so jealously guarded.

'Do not ask of me, I beg you,' she protested. 'Forget the doors and the dungeon. Think of me—*only* of me. I am your wife and I love you—what more must you ask?'

Exasperated, Conrad had dropped the subject. But only for the time being. His mind had been disturbed and it prowled the undiscovered portions of his thoughts the way his body prowled the endless corridors of the castle.

Wherever he went the enigmatic personality seemed to watch, taking note of his determined movements and filing them away for future reference.

How long had they been here? he wondered. Four days? A week? Longer? The way Cassandra meddled with the time it was impossible to keep track of one minute to the next. Already he was losing his ability to think sequentially, and his past had become a doubtful daydream.

But whenever he broached the possibility of vacating the castle and heading back to the Hub she reacted with pique. 'Leave *here*?' she would protest. 'Why, we've only just arrived!' And perhaps they had, in her own personal continuum. But for Conrad's restless mind it seemed that they had been trapped in the castle for ages.

Again and again he tried to pry from her the secret of the dungeon, and again and again she refused to divulge what she knew.

They grew apart, pushed away from each other by the sudden distrust that had reared its ugly head up between them.

'Conrad,' she would beg. 'Leave me alone. Stop *questioning* me. Your insatiable urge to *know* my secrets will destroy our love!'

But he craved satisfaction. This woman was a stranger with some dark, hidden secret. He must wrest it away from her and let the sunlight into their relationship.

'Only *love* me,' she pleaded. 'And that will be enough.' But for Conrad there had to be more.

Eventually she agreed to leave the castle and fly back to

the Hub, but it was too late; he could not live forever with this woman knowing she kept something hidden from him.

'You have secrets,' he accused.

'But doesn't everybody?' Her exasperation remained unconvincing. 'Must you know *everything* about me, Conrad? Isn't it enough to accept me as I am, as I have accepted you?'

Her words angered him and he slid tangentially away from her accusation. 'What attracts you to this dreadful place, anyway? And why do you tamper with it so much?'

'Because it amuses me. I *like* being amused, Conrad. For example—why did you marry me?'

'Because I love you,' he lied. The expression came easy to his practised lips.

She laughed. 'There, you see? I like being amused!'

'Stop it!' he snapped.

'Then if you love me, *love* me, Conrad!' and she held out her naked arms to him.

But she knew then that whatever small affection he had felt for her and not for her body had been trampled by the heavy hooves of his suspicions.

Her arms dropped weakly to her sides. Her expression hardened until her eyes were like two sharp points of steel. 'Very well, then, my love, if you want to see behind those doors, then you shall have your wish.'

Her submission caught him off-guard. He had not expected to triumph so easily. Cassandra's denial had just seemed part of another elaborate game that he might win—if she chose to let him. And she already had.

'I promise,' he said, 'that we will leave the castle as soon as you have shown me what you keep down there.' And his eager eyes held the promise of the return of his love. But it was already too late.

With a look of weary resignation, Cassandra led the way down the narrow flight of stairs to the dungeon.

The room had not changed. Torchlight still flickered above the heavy iron doors and there was a dank feeling in the air. But no frightful moisture seeped through the bricks. The walls and floor were clean.

They stood together on the cold floor. Conrad noticed and was puzzled by the way Cassandra's restless symbiote had settled upon a peculiar pattern; she wore a short yellow dress fringed with lace and her long blonde hair was now swept up into engaging, girlish curls. But her dark eyes were deep and sunken and belied her youthful figure.

'Well,' she asked, 'does this look like a dungeon?'

He shrugged, and gave a crooked grin. 'Come now, Cassandra,' he chided. 'What is it you seek to keep hidden from me?'

'Only myself,' she countered, evasively. 'There are... parts of me... that should remain forever private.'

'Nonsense!'

'Then you do not agree that people should have dungeons and dark, secret thoughts that they may keep forever to themselves?'

'Forever is a long time,' he reminded.

Her shoulders sagged. *Yes, my love, how well I know. And you have no idea, her thoughts whispered, how many secrets a simple lifetime can harbour...*

Conrad turned and pointed to the first door on his left. 'Open it, Cassandra.'

He did not ask; he commanded. And, dumbly, she bowed her head, and looked away. He would always remember the beautiful resigned expression on her face as the first

door swung ponderously open.

'Go ahead,' she whispered, without looking up. 'Step inside...'

Without hesitation he moved forward and peered into the room.

A soft golden light crept out and threw soft patterns on the wall of the dungeon.

Conrad looked into a little fairyland filled with precious things: toys and flowers and dozens of tiny, scurrying creatures no bigger than his hand. There were dolls' houses and teddy-bears, clowns and golliwogs, some of them as big as himself and others small enough to be carried in his pocket. They all studied him with sad eyes. One of the little furry animals stopped its wild scampering and blinked up at him and rubbed its eyes with two tiny hands, as though demanding what *he* was doing in this place. All around him unseen children ran and played tag among the mountains of toys; the tinkling music of their laughter was infectious. Everything was bright and everything was happy, except for a small, darkened corner where an invisible figure sat huddled and wept quietly to herself.

He felt embarrassed, and an intruder, and crept quietly out of the room.

The door swung slowly shut behind him.

Cassandra stood watching him, her arms limp at her sides. Her golden hair had uncured itself and hung straight and tangled down her back. Her eyes were dull and fixed. 'Well,' she asked, 'are you satisfied now?'

He watched the slow trickle of tears move down her pale cheeks, and shook his head, sadly. 'Open the second door, Cassandra.'

Sobbing quietly, she obeyed.

The second door swung inwards slowly, as though reluctant to display what was inside. A cold, bluish light crept out and caused Conrad to shiver. He moved closer and looked inside.

The unfriendly light seemed to seep from the walls of the room. It had a low, oppressive ceiling and it was difficult for him to distinguish anything in the gloomy interior. He took a deep breath and crossed the threshold.

Once inside he stood very still. An aching sense of desolation swept over him and he knew that no friendship could ever have survived this indifferent wasteland. He could not make out the other side of the room in the feeble blue light, but the low ceiling pressed down upon him, suffocating his thoughts.

Gradually his eyes grew accustomed to the level of the strange illumination and he began to discern objects around him in the gloom. He saw a rag doll thrown into a corner, its body ripped and torn and its inane head askew. A jumble of discarded toys lay at his feet. Some had been crushed underfoot and others had been twisted and mutilated before they had been discarded. He heard a distant sound of weeping and a cruel, sardonic laughter. The listless feet of tiny, unseen children wandered disconsolately around the dreary room. Perhaps it was just as well that he could see no more.

The room was a graveyard of innocence. Many dreams had died and found their resting place in this cold citadel. And the soft sounds of weeping that plagued his ears were not the sudden outpourings of grief but the slow, steady sounds of heartbreak and disillusionment that comes from a lifetime of living.

A weighty sadness descended upon his unwilling shoulders and he withdrew from the doleful room and moved

without pause into the next, whose door was already open and inviting.

He stepped into enormous distances and stood upon a flat and desolate plain that seemed to reach out on all sides to a dull and lifeless infinity. A dry, hostile wind moaned across this barren landscape and scraped its sardonic fingers across his face. High overhead a solitary wide-winged bird flew in aimless circles. In the distance he could see a lonely figure trudging slowly towards a non-existent horizon, never getting any farther away from an imaginary point where it had started, or any closer to its invisible goal.

The burden of time closed around Conrad's shoulders and made him want to weep, to have the biting wind pick up his protest and blend it with the high-pitched keening it carried across these desolate wastes. A mindless loneliness gripped him. He sensed the dreadful loss of purpose that accompanied immortality, and for a moment a few willing tears sprang on his cheeks, for he was reminded that he, too, had walked a land like this in the darklands of his dreams.

He turned away and faced his bride.

Her face had changed. Her expression had hardened and there were dark chasms in her eyes that he had never known existed. And no tears stained her pale cheeks.

'Well,' she demanded. 'Have you seen enough?'

Sadly, he shook his head. 'I must see... all that is behind these doors.'

Fear had crept into her face. 'There is still time. We can go back, now, this instant, and forget all this...'

He nodded his head towards the unopened fourth door.

'Please, Cassandra. Open it.'

'But why?' Her voice was raised with passionate intensity. 'Why make me do this? Can you not love me as I am?'

'No, Cassandra. I have to know.'

There was something dark and malignant in her castle and he felt compelled to seek it out and, if necessary, destroy it. Otherwise their happiness would be only a flimsy facade.

'Open the fourth door, Cassandra.'

She raised a weary right arm and held it outstretched towards the door in question. The gesture was one of helpless resignation.

The fourth door swung brazenly open with a great flourish of trumpets that shook every wall of the castle and momentarily deafened Conrad.

He gasped when he saw what lay beyond the doorway. He had never seen so much wealth and opulence as was now revealed to him. He might have been standing on the threshold of an Imperial treasure chamber such as the universe had never known. The walls were solid gold and they soared to dizzying heights; the ceiling was encrusted with precious gems and magnificent hand-made icons were spaced about the golden walls. The overall effect was dazzling. He picked his way between Cassandra's worldly possessions and marvelled at the grandeur of the room. The floor was piled high with jewelry and the ornate bric-a-brac of the civilised universe, and he knew that anything he had ever wanted in the way of wealth and magnificence was within reach of his hands, and faced with such wealth all common cares seemed unimportant.

But he found a crumbling teddy-bear at his feet, and the coffers of gold and jewelry were stained here and there with blood, and a dark corruption had touched everything so

that a dirty patina overlaid the magnificence like a virulent rash.

His joy formed a cold, unpleasant lump in his throat and he stepped back.

Cassandra stood facing him in a robe of royal purple and with a dazzling coronet above her golden hair. Her eyes flashed imperiously and, without a word, she pointed towards the fifth door, and turned away. Her royal robes shimmered and dissolved on their way to some other form.

Conrad stepped into the fifth room and found a brooding lake of tears and the heavy presence of time pushing against him in ponderous waves. It seemed that all the world's tears had somehow been gathered together in this one place. It was night and no moon shone upon the waters. Only the distant, cold glitter of starlight provided any illumination.

Dazed, he sat down on the shore of this supernal lake and stared into the distance. He imagined he could see ghostly shapes moving on the other side of the lake, pale little wraiths whose voices drifted across to him vague and insubstantial, like far off figures in a dream. They might have been children.

He felt the weight of all his past years settling down around him and he did not want to move. One of the more painful by-products of immortality, Conrad remembered, was all the extra time one had to consider the futility of life. And yet a man would cling to it while he could, for want of something more definite and equally serviceable.

He must have sat there for some time, oblivious to the purpose that had driven him there, content to study the deep, sad waters stretching away from him and listening to the doleful dirge that the ghostly wind brought to him on the chill night air.

After a while he got up and tip-toed quietly out of the room.

Cassandra stood dressed from chin to toe in mourning black. The brightness had fallen from her hair and her face was a motionless mask of grief. She looked a lifetime older than when he had last seen her.

'Well?' she asked. 'Now have you seen enough?'

But for some reason he could not pin down her manner angered him. 'Can't you leave yourself *be* for a moment?' he snapped, chiding her fetish for change.

She spread her pale arms away from her body and looked down at the drab gown that her symbiote had conjured up. And her eyes, when she looked up, seemed to cry out that all this was a product of his own persistence.

'Have you not had enough of this?' she demanded. Tears were fresh in her grief-stricken eyes. 'Have you not seen and heard enough of my shame?'

But he knew that he could not leave this dungeon with any doors left unopened.

He pointed towards the sixth door. 'If you would be so kind, my love?'

'Please,' she begged, 'don't ask *this* of me! Go now, and leave me as you found me, *but do not ask me to open that door!*'

But he would not be refused.

'Open it, Cassandra.'

And, weeping, she did as she was bid.

The sixth door swung open with a sound like a soul in torment.

Waves of terror reached out and engulfed Conrad. He

reeled away from the impact, and then stood rigid while his body quaked internally as though all the devils in hell had overpowered his mind. The open doorway gaped cruel and uninviting; a tangle of crooked thorns barred him entry.

Cassandra raised her hand a second time and the barrier of thorns drew back and hugged the sides of the doorway.

He stepped forward, driven by his own personal demon of curiosity.

He peered into the darkness and recoiled. The deep, guttural moaning of tormented souls roared through his mind.

He stood on the threshold of an armoury—or a torture chamber; he couldn't be sure which.

It was dark beyond the forest of thorns. He moved closer and could see how their barbs were tipped with bright crimson blood, and that some portions of the chamber glowed with an eerie red light that made it possible to recognise some details. He saw that the room was crowded with all the cruel instruments of her displeasure, with all the weapons she had ever forged and wielded against an indifferent universe, with all the armour she had ever used to protect herself from the miseries of a lost innocence.

There was no place for tears in this terrible room—only the demented cries that beat against him like waves upon an inhospitable shore. It was like listening to the sound and the fury of a hundred lost souls, a thousand wasted lifetimes.

He stood back aghast—and felt her touch him.

He spun around and saw—first—her face woven into a cruel and unforgiving smile, and then the eerie red glow reflecting off the handgun she had taken down from the nearby wall.

Now she was dressed in the familiar garb of the huntress, and even the brilliant glow of her hair had a feeling of metallic, tensile beauty.

'Now you know,' she whispered, and her voice, in this room, carried the terminal quality of the grave. 'But not *quite* everything . . .'

Dazed, his eyes followed the direction of her outstretched hand. They fastened, somewhat with surprise, upon the great barred doorway at the end of the dungeon.

The seventh and last door . . . that he had almost forgotten.

'Now you will know everything,' she crooned, and led him by the hand to the last door.

Close up it looked enormous. And Conrad wasn't at all sure that he wanted to see what lay beyond this one. He felt uneasy, as if he was being hurried towards an assignment he wanted no part of.

'Wait . . .' he protested.

But Cassandra only gave a cruel, unloving laugh, and gestured contemptuously at the final door. It sprung open with a sudden exclamation and he stumbled across the threshold.

He staggered and almost fell upon the polished floor. He looked up and realised he was standing in the entrance of an enormous catacomb. Grief and impotence hung heavy in the air and the only light came from pale, flickering torches set into the walls.

It was like a labyrinth, with passageways leading off in several directions and winding and twisting their way through some subterranean network.

The walls were like the inside of a cave deep in the earth and the air seemed alive with ghosts. He could hear their

sibilant whisperings and sense their longings like something tangible.

As his eyes became accustomed to the icy gloom he saw that statues had been carved out of the natural rock, and that every passageway was lined with these man-size chisels.

The whisperings pulled him forward and a few paces down one of the passageways leading off to his left.

The statues were all male, he noticed, and they did not line the walls of the passageway in single file, but were spread upwards along the high walls, the topmost specimens with their arms outstretched as though they were groping for some bizarre enlightenment.

There must be hundreds of these figures, Conrad realised. He had no idea of the extent of the labyrinth, or of how many statues had been carved or set into these slimy walls—but the effect was chilling.

It was some time before he realised that the eyes of every statue had turned upon him. Almost, he sensed the imperceptible turning of heads, the slight ripple in the fabric of the passageway, as the silent statues moved in their bondage to face him.

Their sightless eyes burned into his own. One, nearby, opened its mouth and seemed to be about to speak, but Conrad knew that the effort was beyond it. And with a sudden exclamation of terror he knew that these were no statues, but living creatures embalmed in the synthetic masonry of the passageway.

He whirled and faced the doorway that now seemed dangerously far away.

He saw his bride framed in the high archway, her face illuminated by a vengeful glow. 'Well, my love, are they not decorative? These are my lovers, Conrad, or rather, these *were* my lovers. All the men in my life who ever doubted and could not love me for myself alone. How handsome they look now, don't you think?'

'Cassandra ...'

Her name was something foul upon his lips. 'Why... why have you *done* this thing?'

'Because they could not love me. Because they lied and cheated and did anything they could to possess my body. Because they were less than human. And now you, my love, for your folly, must join them ...'

'No, Cassandra, *no!*'

He ran towards her, but she laughed and stepped back and the great door swung irrevocably shut.

Darkness engulfed him.

He hammered on the door until his fists bled and called her name but she did not answer. And afterwards he sobbed and felt the great weight of pity that the statues held for him.

'Cassandra,' he wept. 'Let me *out*. I *love* you! I will do anything for you—but let me out. Please. Don't leave me here ...'

And he had time to scream—once—before a portion of the nearby wall bulged out to receive him.

Cassandra stood and faced the closed door. 'Farewell, my love,' she whispered. Her voice almost breaking. 'But *oh!* If only you had never asked me to open those doors ...'

She covered her face in her hands and turned and fled from the dungeon.

If only he had loved me, she thought. Really loved me.

But he had just been like all the rest.

If only real love was possible. If only she could find it somewhere in this emotionally barren universe. If only every activity she committed herself to did not prove eventually worthless. If only ...

Her odious deed hung over her like an uncomfortable shroud. She fluttered around the castle like a stricken bird, her mood forcing each room through violent, bewildering transitions as she passed through.

She needed some sort of catharsis to expiate the terrible tensions that had developed within her. In desperation she fled to the entryport and commanded it to open. She grabbed the ancient jet-pack from its cradle and strapped it clumsily across her shoulders.

The wicked-looking handgun she still carried would suffice for the hunt she had in mind.

A featureless grey ramp extruded and carried her out into darkness.

Without waiting to locate herself properly she launched herself blindly into the night sky. A mist obscured her vision, so that she did not see that the landscape had gone mad. It couldn't respond to the riotous confusion that had swamped her disturbed mind.

The jet-pack carried her straight up into an airless void.

Her lungs prepared to burst. Her eyes widened in terror and her beautiful, cruel mouth hung open. Her body convulsed in a grotesque parody of death.

For a moment she floated, serene and content, and then the castle extruded a long filament of itself in the form of a loving hand and plucked her beautiful corpse from the intransigent sky.

It drew her hastily inside and placed her in a chamber in a deep part of itself where the damage to her body was restored and the breath of life pumped into her.

She sat up slowly and blinked in the soft light of the operating room. The catharsis of death had eliminated all question of guilt from her mind. She felt almost happy again. The worst was over for another time and there was much to look forward to: a whole universe of opportunities.

The castle had already altered subtly. Already Conrad's essence had been processed and absorbed into the genetic pattern of the building. Like all her other unsuccessful lovers his personality, as such, had ceased to exist as something human, and had been drawn into the general substance of the castle. His mind would live on, like those of his doomed companions, but the price of his unfaithfulness had been the ultimate surrender of his precious identity to the group mind that governed the nature of her castle.

Content at last, she spread her arms and her body against the warm stones. She closed her eyes and rested one cheek against the soft, yielding substance. She sighed, happily, and a smile appeared on her child-like face.

The deep empathy of the castle filled her heart with happiness, with the joy and thrill of the bloodless hunt, and she knew that for as long as she lived—and that would be a considerable time, even by her own 'immortal' standards—there would always be this castle, enriched by the ghosts of her irrelative lovers and her triumph, and whenever she wished, whenever the universe and all its dismal fancies lost their currency and life itself seemed devoid of purpose, she could always return here.

And worship at the shrine of herself.

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THE FAUNTLEROY SYNDROME

BY
Brian N. Ball

Jenny awoke. Mother's Man was whistling.

She opened her eyes and saw the bowl of daffodils and through them the sun shining. Her toes wiggled.

'I'm sixteen,' she whispered. 'Sixteen!'

The counterpane flew. The curtains rattled open.

'Oh, Jenny!' giggled the postwoman. She held up a packet. 'Here's your plaque from the Man Bureau.'

'Hurry up!' called Mother. 'We're going shopping, Jen!'
Jenny was downstairs and unwrapping the plaque. 'A Man!' breathed Jenny.

'I'm sending Conrad for the paper,' said Mother. 'Oh, that's a nice plaque! Such a sweet little symbol!' She helped Jenny to swing the chain into place. 'There! Anything you want from the shop?'

'No, Mummy.'

'Then off you go, Conrad!'

'Conrad!' called Jenny. 'Just a minute.' Mother's Man stopped. His delivery bag became entangled with his legs.

'We're having another Man here,' said Jenny.

Conrad choked. He ran away laughing and whistling, the bag thumping against his broad rump.

'First model?' asked the manageress.

'Yes. She's just sixteen. Today,' said Mother.

Everyone smiled, the assistant, two passing shoppers, the manageress and the girl who opened the inspection gates. Jenny blushed. So much happiness.

'You're a lucky girl to have such a considerate mother,' said the assistant. 'Some girls don't get a Man till they're in their twenties.'

'Not that she wants anything extravagant,' said Mother firmly. 'We're not in the Superman bracket.'

'There's Grandma's money,' hissed Jenny.

'No!'

'May I see Jenny's Man Permit?' asked the manageress.

Jenny lifted the symbolic plaque from between her breasts.

'Oh, yes, that's all right. No trouble there.' She turned to Mother. 'We do have to be careful, you know, Madam. An inexperienced assistant sold a Man to a registered Man-eater the other week. Poor man. We had to break him up for spares.'

Jenny's Mother tried not to giggle.

'Mummy!' said Jenny. She knew why Mother was giggling. Her last Man had been a disaster. She had bought him from a reft store, and later it had turned out that the Man had been in deep-freeze for over fifty years. But Conrad had been a good buy. He had come with a Consumers' Association docket and apart from his tendency to overweight and his habit of whistling he had been a splendid Man.

'Let's look at you, Miss,' said the manageress. 'You're quite dainty. Nice little bosom. Neat hips. How about a cheerful little ectomorph? Something around nine stone? We've three or four she could choose from. Show her the slim young men,' she told her assistant.

'Now that's nice,' said Jenny's Mother. She pointed to the glass panel behind which a chubby little Man played with a wheelbarrow.

'He is sweet,' assured the assistant. 'But what about this one?' She motioned to the girl with the keys. Down came the panels and a thin, bearded youth peered out in wonder.

Jenny hardly heard either her Mother or the assistant. She was looking at a brightly-lit inspection run where a young man sat staring at the one-way glass. His hair was

blonde and long. His nose was straight and his body was angular and flat. Small hard muscles rippled as he breathed.

'What's this, Jenny?'

Jenny heard nothing. The lithe Man glared. He tapped a fly on his ear. Jenny shuddered. He bounded to his feet and slammed a football at the glass. Jenny felt faint.

'Certainly not, my girl! Oh, no!'

Jenny's Mother took her by the shoulder and placed her firmly by the run containing the chuckling little chubby Man.

'He's called Charles,' said the assistant. The girl with the keys sprayed deodorant onto him. 'Nice Man! Here, Charles!'

Charles grinned. He sat on his haunches. He placed his hands forward, elbows tucked into his sides.

'Much more suitable,' said the assistant. She whispered to Mother. Jenny caught the gist of the conversation: it seemed that the lithe Man had given trouble and was back for an obedience course.

'Charles will be just right for you, dear,' said the assistant. Jenny groaned.

'Say "Hello",' said the girl with the keys.

'Hello!' said the Man.

'Mummy knows best,' said Mother.

'A young girl needs a nice little Man at first,' the assistant said. 'Charles is one of our best Men.'

'He's trained?' asked Mother.

'All our Men can be taken into any house.'

'And guaranteed?'

'We have full Consumer Protection.'

'For a year?'

The assistant hesitated. 'Yes,' she said.

'That includes all spares?'

'Yes.'

'And he's quite sound?'

'All our Men have a full Capability Certificate.' The assistant pulled out a sheaf of papers. 'Brain. Heart. Lights. Limbs. And—'

'Of course,' said Mother.

'Let me see,' said Jenny.

'In good time, dear.'

Jenny looked at the mass of curly hair. 'He is rather cuddly,' she said.

'That's more sensible, dear.'

'Not your type,' said the assistant, gesturing to the lithe Man, who was now pacing up and down the run.

'How much?' said Mother.

The bargaining began. They compromised. More than Mother intended; less than she had feared.

Jenny was careful not to look at the cage where the lithe Man was standing on his hands.

'Take his lead, Miss,' said the girl with the keys. 'He's yours now.'

'Carry these,' ordered Mother.

Charles puffed and struggled with his blow-up all-weather home.

'And these.'

He hefted a carton of conditioning tablets onto his back. 'With our compliments,' said the assistant.

Jenny helped him fasten on his outdoor garment.

'Just these now,' said Mother.

'What's this?' asked Jenny.

'Hair trimmer. Loofah. And deodorants.'

'Does Conrad have all these?'

'Naturally. A Man's insufferable about the house without them.'

'That's all then?'

'Not quite, dear,' said the assistant. 'There's the Code.'

'You have to sign, not me,' said Mother.

It brought the matter home quite sharply then. Owning a Man wasn't just a matter of a cuddly bed-mate and someone to carry things. There were responsibilities.

Jenny read through the brief but comprehensive document: '...no interference with conditioning... immediate report to the Man Bureau if any personality erosion... kept on a leash in public places... no tobacco...'

'What's tobacco, Mummy?'

'It's—I'm not sure, dear.'

'A stimulant,' said the assistant. 'Very harmful. Something from the old days.'

'...penalties for keeping a Man in an offensive state...' Jenny read on to the end.

She signed. She could not resist a glance at the lithe figure, now recumbent. She imagined herself leading him out instead of fat little Charles.

'Stop hopping!' she ordered. 'Walk straight!'

'All right!' beamed Charles.

'Bring him back for a check-up every two weeks or so,' said the assistant. 'The service is free.'

The manageress came across to them. Another customer was leading a pair of stubby Men away.

'Oh, splendid, Madam! Charles is a good little Man! Jenny's new Man rolled over in delight. 'Down, Charles! Now, Madam, can we do anything for you?'

Mother looked wistfully at a well-groomed elderly Man in a teal-lined run. He was contemplating a trombone.

'Archibald?' said the manageress. 'He's so artistic.'

Archibald blew a serene raspberry.

'No,' said Mother. 'I'll keep Conrad for a little longer.'

'As Madam wishes. But why not bring him round for a short revitalising course?'

'Maybe. I'll call again.'

'Do, Madam, do!'

Mother was loaded with literature which she passed on to Jenny's Man. He promptly dropped it. They went home in the rain, Charles treading in all the puddles, whilst Jenny felt wet, revulsed, and exhilarated all at the same time.

'I'm Conrad,' Mother's Man said at the gate.

'I'm Charles,' said Jenny's Man.

'I live here.'

'I'm Jenny's new Man.'

'I'm her Mummy's Man.'

Charles thought. 'I'm twenty-five,' he offered. 'I think. I'm older.'

'Yes.'

'I go for the papers.'

'I'm sleeping in Jenny's bed tonight.'

'I'm in my blow-up.'

'Poor old fellow.'

'You'll be outside soon.'

'Go for a run,' said Jenny.

'Yes.'

They ran around the block, half-a-dozen other Men looking on in admiration.

Jenny went to see her best friend. It was Sunday.

'But what was he like?'

'Oh, all right. Like all the rest.'

'And I won't be sixteen till May,' said Eileen. 'Tell me!'

'Oh, he's got the basic equipment. But they're all the same. He's like Mummy's Man.'

'I'm not sure I'd like one like your Mummy's Man. And certainly not one like my Mummy's Man.'

They watched Eileen's Mother's Man, who was sitting morosely in his blow-up.

'Doesn't he ever go out?'

'Not since my Mummy told him she was trading him in.'

'I'd like to trade Charles in.'

'What! Already?'

Jenny suggested tennis. They played till tea-time. Eileen's Mummy's Man became quite lively as he scampered about after the tennis balls. Then he turned morose again and tried to hide the balls in odd corners.

'Freddie!' said Eileen. 'I'll fetch Mummy!'

'Just like Charles!' said Jenny.

'You're odd,' said Eileen. 'You've only just got him.'

Jenny sipped her tea. 'I'd like to trade him in. Now. This minute.'

'Whatever's the matter, Jen? This doesn't sound like you. What's the matter with your Man?'

'I've got my Grandma's money,' said Jenny, half to herself. 'I could go down to the store and—'

'Oh no you couldn't.'

'Why not?'

'Not till your eighteenth birthday.'

'Oh,' Jenny bit into a sandwich. 'I'll poison him.'

'Oh, Jen! How could you be so cruel!'

'Isn't what your Mummy's doing cruel to Freddie?'

'We've still got responsibilities,' said Eileen. 'What's the matter?'

'Oh, nothing!'

She couldn't tell Eileen.

She went two miles out of her way home. Without consciously making the decision to look at the Man store, she found herself walking that way. It was quiet. There was no sound at all. The big display windows, with their one-way glass were deserted. All the Men went to their dens at about nine in the evening.

Jenny was about to turn away when a flicker of movement caught her attention. A tall lean figure rose from the gloom of the inspection run. It was the lithe Man. She looked at the list of Men. It struck her that she didn't know his name.

'Jeremy!' she breathed.

She dreamt about him for the next two weeks. Every night. And she told Eileen.

'But what can you see in a man like that!' hissed Eileen. They were in class, and the History lecturer was booming at them:

'So, my dears, we owe the very foundation of our state to the Two Great Spermicidal Wars. After all, they completely freed us from an antique dependence upon...'

'He's so—well...'

'And if you look at the screen you will see the only pictures we have of those terrible days.'

The Men were lying in ranks. Swollen and dead.

'Not a nice sight. But out of it came the new life. Civilisation as we know it. Thus came the day of the Mother, the Woman, the Life-Giver. That is the way of Great Mother Nature.'

She waited. The response came back:

'Great Mother!'

'What's that?' asked Jenny, whispering.

'What?'

'There, in that Man's mouth.'

'I don't know.' Eileen looked again: 'Why?'

'It looks like my symbol.'

The history lesson dragged on.

'I'd take him away to the hills,' sighed Jenny.

'What!'

'Who's talking? You, Jenny?'

'Oh, no, Miss.'

More time passed.

'Oh, Jeremy!'

'Don't be silly, Jen.'

'I'd take him in our car. To the cabin.'

'By yourself?'

'Oh no, Eileen. You could come.'

The lecturer was talking about the evolution of something. And about the freedom from conception and slavery and the whole apparatus of imposed motherhood.

'They wouldn't let you lease him for a week?'

'Mummy blocked my bank account.'

'It was you talking, Jenny! Now, Miss! Tell me about the 24th Century revival of civilisation!'

Jenny tried.

'There were two major factors,' she began. 'One was ...'

'The Sperm Banks!' whispered Eileen.

'... the Sperm Banks.'

'Good. Yes, they were of fundamental importance. Without them—and the help of the Mother—we couldn't have kept the female race alive. We needed *some* spermatozoa—we're not hermaphrodites, girls!'

'And the second was ...' Jenny looked at Eileen.

'Yes?'

'... was ...'

'I thought you weren't listening! Still, my dear, I hear you have a Man! Now, who can tell us?'

'It was the Fauntleroy Syndrome,' said Eileen, in a burst of inspiration.

'Splendid! Another hour's reading tonight, Miss,' the lecturer told Jenny.

Jenny groaned. She would miss seeing Jeremy.

The lecturer smiled. The class relaxed. All but Jenny. They knew that Miss Humpage delighted in retailing the details of the early days. And so it went on. In the most minute detail. The drugs, the conditioning treatment, the careful erasure of harmful traits, the obedience trials, the surgery that was sometimes needed: all the processes of the Fauntleroy Syndrome.

Eileen's eyes flickered to the text in front of her.

'Look!' she whispered.

It was a strange picture. Heavily-built men were engaged in heaving sturdy young women over their shoulders; it was entitled *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. It was so ridiculous that Jenny laughed aloud. Fortunately Miss Humpage had made a joke at that precise moment.

Jenny's face cleared. Her eyes narrowed.

'That's what we'll do,' she whispered.

'What, Jen?'

They took her Mother's tool-box. Eileen's Mother worked at a garage, so they knew about files and drills and chisels.

The store was deserted.

'What's the time?' whispered Jenny.

'Two o'clock.'

'We've an hour before the moon comes up.'

'Where do we start?'

'Here,' said Jenny. 'The side door. Where they take the Men out for a run.'

Eileen passed a heavy cold chisel. They giggled in terror as the tool-box swung open and the tools crashed onto the pavement:

'Quiet!' they both said, convulsed.

'Hush!' whispered Eileen. 'What was that?'

They listened. A faint moaning sound came from within the building.

The sound came again. Low and mournful.

'A Man in for treatment,' said Eileen. 'It might be Freddie. He went yesterday.'

'I can't do this, Eileen.'

The door was too tightly fastened. They tried hammering the chisel, but they banged their hands.

'Let's go home, Jen!'

'No!'

'But we can't get in.'

'Up the drainpipe.'

Both girls shinned up noisily, laughing in an ecstasy of terror. Eileen found a window on the first floor. There was a simple catch, which Jenny pushed. The screws gave easily. They crept through the window and found themselves in an office. A loud clicking noise filled the silent room with mechanical chatter.

'What's that?' said Eileen.

'Air conditioning,' Jenny told her. 'For the Men.'

'The door's locked!'

'Let's see,' said Jenny, flashing the torch. 'There.'

It opened silently. They tiptoed through it.

'Just a minute,' said Jenny. 'We'll need something to wrench the locks off.'

She shone the torch until she located the wrench and the chisel. Something else attracted her attention: a sombre-looking book.

'Hurry up, Jen!'

'Coming!' She stuffed the book into her pocket.

'Let's go home!'

'Not without Jeremy.'

'Oh, Jenny! In there!'

A shape moved inside one of the inspection runs.

'What is it?'

'Only a Man. The one Mummy fancied.'

'Fancy us as Man-stealers!'

'This way.'

'We'll get five years!'

'This is him.'

Jeremy was snoring. He sprawled in angular patterns.

'And that's Jeremy?'

'Yes.'

'Oh.'

'Well, what do you think, Eileen?'

Eileen didn't answer. 'Will he come quietly?'

'Let's try,' said Jenny. 'You hold the chisel. I'll knock it with this.'

'Ouch! Be careful!'

Inside, Jeremy sprang to his feet. Eileen dropped the chisel, and Jenny began to smash at the lock with the wrench. At once the partition slid smoothly down. Jeremy looked at them. He turned away and composed himself for

sleep on a pile of plastic cushions.

'Poke him,' said Eileen. 'That's what Mummy does—did—to Freddie when he sulked.'

'No, it's cruel,' said Jenny. 'Oh, come on, Jeremy!'

Still he ignored them. He pretended to snore.

'I'm Jenny, this is Eileen, we're coming to take you away.'

Jeremy got up onto one shoulder: 'Play?'

'Later.'

'Food?'

'Yes.'

'Breakfast?'

'Yes!' said Jenny in exasperation.

'Come on!' said Eileen.

'Go?'

'Yes,' said Jenny. 'With me.'

'The moon will be up! We'll be caught!' wailed Eileen.

Jenny grabbed Jeremy by the hand.

'Come on!'

'Can I take Tommy?'

'Who's he?'

The lithe Man pounced on a wooden baulk. There was a rough head and two huge eyes. In the soft, green night-light, it looked like a fish.

'Oh, Jenny, hurry!'

'Can I?'

'Yes! Bring it!'

'All right.'

'Jenny, we can't really steal him!'

Jenny barely heard. She felt her toes crawling inside her plimsolls. 'This way, Man!'

The next fortnight was an idyll. Curiously, though Jenny saw the manageress of the store on two occasions—there were one or two small defects in Charles, a touch of lumbago, new lower teeth—there was no mention of the theft of Jeremy. Jenny noticed that the inspection run was occupied by a large, shaggy man.

Each evening when her Mother was in bed and Charles had taken to his blow-up, Jenny sped into the mountains to the weekend cabin.

Mother sensed that something was wrong. For a start, there were the bruises. Then Jenny took to wearing flowers in her hair—wild, mountain flowers. She was becoming softer and rounder at the hips and the bosom.

'You're putting on weight, my girl,' said Mother one morning. 'Conrad! It's your turn to go for the milk!'

'It's the school diet,' Jenny said. 'I'll cut out the morning doughnuts.'

Eileen noticed the doll. Jenny had taken to carrying the rough-shaped little figure around with her.

'Isn't that Jeremy's Tommy?'

'Oh no!'

'It is.'

'Yes.'

Eileen insisted on seeing Jeremy in the hills. Jenny managed to put her off for a week, but Eileen began to be unpleasantly insistent. Terrified, Jenny agreed. But she didn't warn Eileen about Jeremy. Somehow it seemed right to let events take their predestined course. She drove in a dream.

The cabin was quiet in the clear mountain air. A thin line of blue smoke curled upwards. Harsh croaking sounds came from the pines.

'Where is he?' said Eileen.

She jumped into the air as a deep, gruff voice boomed out behind her:

'Who the hell's this?'

'Great Mother!' screamed Eileen. 'What is it?' She covered behind Jenny, who was smiling seraphically.

'I said who the hell's this!'

The figure was tall, scruffy, unshaven, sunburned, angry, and to Eileen, utterly terrifying.

'It's a Man! But it can't—'

'Hello, Jeremy, dear,' said Jenny.

Jeremy threw the carcass of a deer onto the ground. He pushed his face close to Eileen's. She saw his bloodshot eyes and his blonde bristles and she smelled him—'

'Come here,' he said.

'No.'

The face altered, full of an ancient menace. Eileen hurried forward.

'You, Fatty. You bring any beer?'

'No. I—'

'Tobacco?'

'I don't know what it—'

'For his pipe,' said Jenny. She pointed to the symbol which was jammed in a corner of Jeremy's mouth.

'What's he got that in his mouth—'

'Get her away!'

Eileen paused. 'There's some gin in the car.'

Jeremy looked at her. Eileen shuddered.

'Get it.'

Eileen ran. She was about to hand the half-bottle of gin to Jeremy when Jenny snatched it from her.

Jenny passed the bottle, open, to Jeremy. 'Here, darling.'

'Darling?' whispered Eileen.

Jeremy pitched the empty bottle at her. He grabbed Jenny by the arm:

'Cook steaks. I sleep now. And you,' he said to Eileen:

'Stay away!'

'I'll see you in class,' whispered Eileen.

Jenny was humming. She didn't hear.

In class, Eileen felt safe enough to ask questions:

'What have you done, Jen!'

'This.' She pushed across a sombre booklet. *An Account of the Maintenance Process*, it read.

Eileen looked inside. '*The chief aspects of The Fauntleroy Syndrome*,' she read. Her eyes flickered over the text: '*Men are basically young children. They need the Mother.*' And there, under the neat headings, was the outline of the conditioning processes which Men underwent from birth. The exact dosages. The precise number of shock treatments. The hook-ins to sleep-learning. The inbuilt guidance systems. The glandular controls.

Eileen felt the colour drain from her face. She gasped in short gulping breaths. She turned to Jenny as the bell chimed out for the beginning of the lesson in Man Management. 'You haven't, Jenny!'

'I have.'

'But how—'

'I reversed the Syndrome.'

'Horrible!'

'He's marvellous. And anyway, Men were once like that.'

'It's awful. What's that you're knitting?'

'A sweater.'

Jenny's idyll went on for another three months. During that time she saw references to an escaped Man, one Jeremy, who had somehow found the switch to his inspection run. The authorities were not alarmed. He would

return when he found that the summer was not endless, and that a Man could not live alone. Such escapes were rare, but never alarming.

Sometimes Jenny felt a yearning for the old life, especially when Jeremy was more than usually arrogant. Charles suffered, too.

'It's not that I think you're a bad little Man,' Jenny explained one beautiful evening when she was loading a firkin of beer into the car. 'I think you're very sweet.' She watched him struggling with his end of the firkin. 'Oh, go and play with Conrad!'

Soon afterwards, Mummy called her back as she went out for the car:

'I'm in a hurry, Mummy.'

'I won't keep you. Wherever it is you're going.'

Suddenly, Jenny felt sick. 'Ugh!'

'Dear! What is it?'

'School lunch.'

'Keep to fruit juice, Jenny. She looked more closely, but the night was beginning to darken. 'You are putting on weight!'

Jenny began to eat surreptitiously. Eileen watched.

'Why?' she asked.

Jenny ate deeply into her third helping of apple pie.

'It's my age,' she said. Then she burst into tears. 'Oh, it isn't, Eileen!'

Eileen looked at her in horror. 'But you can't! Not till you're eighteen! You've not got your Permit yet!'

Jenny fished out her knitting.

'O, Great Mother!' said Eileen. 'And stop nursing that ridiculous Tommy!'

Jeremy was unsympathetic. 'The hell with this tinned food!' he bellowed. He flung the sweater into the pines. 'And the hell with your lousy knitting!'

'It wasn't my fault the sleeves came out too long.'

'The hell with you! I'm going for fresh meat! Get my rifle.' He strode off and shouted back as he went: 'And get rid of that damned silly Tommy!'

Her eyes followed him mutely, and when he was out of sight she began to clean up the cabin. She was whistling to herself when she came across the too-large underwear. Unwilling to believe what she had seen, she raced for the car and set out for home. She turned off a few miles down the mountain road. She waited for what she knew must happen.

Eileen's little tourer drifted around the corners with an impatient flourish. Jenny reached for the hand-gun they kept for scaring off the big cats in the mountains. But the baby kicked and she had a spasm. She went to Eileen's home.

Eileen took it calmly. By this time, Jenny was too exhausted for anger. They looked at one another sympathetically.

'The two-timing swine!' sobbed Jenny. 'He's left me pregnant and I haven't got a Permit!'

'It's a problem,' said Eileen.

Jenny caught the inflection. 'Not you too!'

'There's something else,' said Eileen. She made a couple of calls and soon three other friends of theirs were in the room.

'We've got something to tell you,' they said.

'Oh, Jeremy!' said Jenny.

'The swine,' said the other girls.

'We'd better send for Miss Humpage,' said Eileen

decisively. 'She always knows what to do.'

'It might be a good idea,' said one of the girls.

Again Jenny caught that odd inflection:

'Not Miss Humpage?'

'She found me with him a few weeks ago. He came for whisky from my Mummy's shop and Miss Humpage walked in. She stayed the night.'

They looked at one another. 'Miss Humpage!'

They held on to one another, rocking with laughter.

'Then there was the party of huntresses,' said another of Jenny's class-mates.

'And Miss Humpage found him with a pair of telephone lineswomen in the cabin,' said a tall, slim girl.

Jenny felt afraid. 'I'm going to my Mummy,' she said. The others called her back, but she hurried on.

When she reached home, Mummy sent Conrad and Charles out to dig the garden.

'Mummy, there's something I've got to tell—'

'Jenny, there's something I've been meaning—'

'Oh, Mummy!'

Mother explained. When she had finished, they comforted one another.

'Oh, Jeremy!' they wailed together.

'It can't go on,' Jenny said. 'It's—it's not—I mean, we can't let it go on!'

'A real Man,' sighed Mother. Jenny watched as her Mother began knitting.

'He'll have to go!' said Jenny.

'Does he have to?'

Jenny's report received prompt attention at the Man Bureau. However, that evening two stolid policemen succumbed at once to Jeremy's attentions. They put up a strong resistance against all-comers, and it was not until half a battalion of strong-minded elderly but fit Reservists were sent against the fortified cabin that Jeremy was taken. A keen-eyed Captain gave him the coup-de-grace with a paralysing dart in the groin.

The hall the women had chosen for their meeting was crowded. Miss Humpage took the chair, with Jenny's Mother as secretary.

Jenny's Mother passed around the ancient guide-books and brochures. They got down to the main business of the evening.

'We're all agreed, then?' asked Miss Humpage. 'No faint hearts? Do we all know what we want?'

'Yes!' they called back.

'Then here it is. I've hired a small steamer for the rest of the summer. We have a navigator, engineers, cooks, a physicist, huntresses, a plumber, in fact a selection of all the skills and professions. Oh, yes: Doctor Marlowe will be joining us. And the midwife.'

'But what about buildings? We'll need labourers,' said one of the women.

'We're in no condition to heave logs and carry bricks, said another.

'We'll take our Men,' said Miss Humpage.

Jenny was called. She held up the copy of the pamphlet.

'It's easy enough to reverse the conditioning,' she told them.

Terrible fears shook the assembled audience.

Charles and Conrad began to creep up one of the gangways in pursuit of a large beetle. The women watched them. Then they looked at Jenny:

'When?'



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ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

by Richard
A. Gordon

Immediately John Martin's respiration faltered, the Sleepy-time ads, which were transmitted to his brain by the apparatus concealed in his mattress, cut themselves off automatically. He awoke feeling he really must book a seat for at least one of the Shakespeare Festival productions next week. And this was odd, for he was disgusted by the inhumanity of the Plays. It was even more odd if one considered that his typically academic indiscretion in writing to the *Stage Weekly* the previous year condemning a particularly bloodthirsty production of *Hamlet* was almost certain to land him in a leading—and therefore fatal—role in one of the Plays this year. But perhaps the implanted desire to support the 2056 Festival which he awoke fighting each morning wasn't so strange if one considered that Tudor Holdings Inc., the vast corporation from which Martin's university had rented his flat, was itself financed from the vast yearly profits of the huge Shakespeare Festival organisation. In fact, the organisation, under many different names, was landlord to the vast majority of the British Landed population.

The corporation-provided robogirl stirred in response to his awakening, and he flicked a switch in his tousled hair, freezing an artificial smile on its face. The room switched on the wall-screen, and the daily Festival propaganda began. He grimaced, unable to avoid it. A harsh voice screamed: 'Shakespeare Festival just one week away! Book now for the many star attractions! Greater realism than ever!'

The screen showed what was meant by Greater Realism. Brutus and Cassius stabbed Caesar, who staggered with agonised expression, silver knife in his back punctuating his gasp: 'Et tu, Brute?', before collapsing in a spreading pool of blood.

Martin moved hurriedly into the tiny bathroom, where as he washed he was given no relief. The small mirror-screen displayed a buxom Cleopatra in the act of applying the asp, perishing with the desirable maximum of pain, while a husky female voice ordered him to get right down to the Avon Theatre and book seats NOW! Back in the living room, bed and robo-girl had been cleared away into the wall and replaced by the breakfast table, while the screen displayed Richard III perishing at Bosworth; the tableau completed by the careful placing of a bloodstained sword into the king's ruined body at a suitably aesthetic angle. A voice howled: 'You can SEE and EXPERIENCE Richard of England in his death agonies as his foul tyranny is vanquished by Noble Justice!'

Martin averted his thin face from the ads and toyed with his cereal. For several days now he had awaited the visiphone call which would inform him of his selection—which would almost certainly prove to be fatal. Although official figures were not released, it was rumoured that several thousand people died yearly in the bloody reconstructions of Shakespeare's more gory tragedies. Civilisation affected to despise sham. Every stage death had to be real; each year, millions of cheerful families treated their kiddies to a Play, they were something to reminisce about for another year, an oasis of violent reality in a desert of urban unreality. Martin had seen his parents die in a production of *Antony and Cleopatra* when he was ten for a crime he had never understood. A state orphanage and subsequent academic career had finally, inevitably, led to his impractical indignation boiling over in the writing of a suicidal letter criticising the autocratic order. That letter had exorcised his twenty-seven years of mental sterility, but it was

likely to prove a fatal cure for his dissatisfied conscience. Fingering his long nose, he feared the worst.

Then the visiphone rang.

Feeling totally numb, he reached forward and pressed the CONTACT switch.

The sallow face at the other end wasted no time in formal identification. Theatre staff never made mistakes. Their power was as complete as was possible for any institution not formally recognised by a weak legislature.

'Mr. John Martin', the man announced. 'The Theatre-Royale of London is pleased to let you know that you have been chosen to play the part of Macbeth, in the play Macbeth, by William Shakespeare, on the third night of Shakespeare Festival Week. Your presence is therefore requested for hypno-conditioning at the Theatre on Friday, the 16th April, at 10.00 hours. I have to inform you that a Tracker-bird has already been assigned to you, and accordingly all your actions will be made known to us should you attempt to do anything rash.'

Both voice and vision abruptly faded, leaving Martin staring at the blank screen, oblivious to the ads for a Modern Dress production of Henry V. After a while he turned to the dispenser and dialled for a double whyskick on the rocks. The synthetic alcohol did him good, and his mind began to function again. Macbeth, eh? He wasn't necessarily finished yet. He knew that Macbeth didn't get killed onstage. He exited fighting with Macduff, and a short while later the latter returned, holding the villain's head. Maybe, there was a slight chance...

Turning to the dispenser again, he dialled the book section, and requested a copy of the *Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Possession of this book was demanded by the ethics of the time, but he had never been able to bring himself to live in the same flat as the murderer of his parents—and possibly himself as well. He paid the requested two shillings, and the shiny black casing of the book landed in the IN hopper. He removed the celluloid reel and fitted it into the scanner with trembling fingers. Flipping the FORWARD switch, he ran through the history plays. Cutting the switch at random, he found he'd run into Hamlet; not a bad guess. He ran it back a bit and depressed the STOP switch again. Yes, there it was. Stopping and starting several times, he got it aligned at the beginning of the play, dialled for another whyskick, and settled back with the viewscreen at eye level. He shivered to see the loathsome prancings of the old witches who loomed up through the cold Scottish mist, before the play gripped his attention.

When it was over, he sat back and did some hard thinking. He was in a mess. On Friday, three days from now, he would be conducted to the Theatre-Royale by the tiny mechanical Tracker-bird which even now would be hovering silently outside his door, waiting for his emergence, to settle itself like a symbolic albatross over his head, to report on his movements and let people know that he, John Martin, was a chosen victim. And once in the theatre, his part would be artificially impressed on his brain; the hypno-conditioning would let wild Macbeth take over his brain and his own will might well desert him. He had heard only rumours about the strength of the hypno-conditioning, but those rumours were horrific.

To beat the system—what a melodramatic idea!—and stay alive, he had to employ the gap between his exit with Macduff and the latter's re-entry with his head. He would have to kill Macduff and assume the other's identity. Here

he would be assisted by the fact that all Play-actors wore stylised and flexible masks which moulded their faces into the traditional features of the particular character. The Plays had come to place ritualism on a higher pedestal than individual interpretation. The halcyon days of Olivier and Gielgud were dead; the hypno-conditioning meant that any given character was played in exactly the same fashion from one performance to the next.

To masquerade successfully as Macduff would necessitate perfection in Macduff's last few lines; thereafter he would have to play the game by ear. He was sure that the presumed impossibility of bucking the system would help him thereafter; nobody believed it to be possible; the Plays, the execution blocks of the world which reduced murder to the status of a viewer sport, provided an infallible system. This belief was to his advantage. After a while, he stretched, and smiled faintly. Now at least he knew where he was—or believed he did. The game had started, and his conscience, which had suffered his unwilling acceptance of a system he hated for years, was clear at last. If the whyskicks had induced an artificial optimism in him, he refused to recognise this, and perhaps it was as well. For he had plenty to do before Friday.

But by the time he stood uncertainly before the huge bulk of the Theatre-Royale at 9.55 a.m. on Friday morning, the Tracker-bird angrily buzzing its impatience two feet in front of his head, this initial optimism had evaporated. The journey up from the coast into the central London conurbation had been an ordeal. He had not yet learned to ignore the whispered asides and amused snickers of the public who saw and were impressed by the Tracker-bird, the tiny two-inch-diameter silver globe which moved purposefully before him through the underground system and along the walkway strips; he resented their vicarious excitement, and resented even more the innumerable ads he had seen which showed him, Macbeth, bodiless; head held aloft by a triumphant Macduff in the final scene of *his* play...

The theatre stood fifty metres back from the slowest of the walkway strips; he stood on a marble plaza which led to a flight of graceful steps leading to the entrance. The front elevation, constructed from the purest travertine, was perhaps a hundred metres in breadth and fifty in height. Near the top, above the entrance, huge lettering proclaimed: THEATRE-ROYALE. Below this, smaller but no less conspicuous letters said: BLESSED BE THE BARD.

The theatre could hold over twenty thousand people. The knowledge made him feel very small. The Tracker-bird buzzed angrily, hovering in front of his face, and he started reluctantly across the plaza towards the steps.

Inside the battery of revolving doors, the entrance lobby was cool, dim, and completely deserted. A neon arrow attached to the wall twenty metres to his right said ACTORS. The Tracker-bird had already drifted towards the passage indicated by the arrow, and Martin followed. His footsteps echoed slightly in the deserted silence, he entered the passage, deliberately archaic with its baroque panelling. The passage turned a right-angle and branched in two directions. The Tracker-bird led him towards the two police officers who stood at ease beside one branch. He approached them nervously. What were police doing at Play rehearsals? Of course, he knew perfectly well.

'Rehearsals?' asked one, not unkindly.

Martin nodded. 'Yes. Macbeth...'

The other, an older man with a burn scar across the

right cheek, guffawed and dug him in the ribs. 'Macbeth, eh? You'd better hurry up, Macbeth.'

He hurried on, cheeks burning, behind the Tracker-bird, into a brightly-lit passage thirty metres in length. Doors the same colour as the cream walls opened off at three metre intervals. At the end, a short flight of steps led to an open door, and past this, he could see an open area which could only be the stage.

Two more police officers stood at this door and he halted with involuntary dismay. One of them saw him immobile at the far end of the passage, and shouted:

'Get a move on, you. You're late.'

He broke into a compliant run and was shoved in the back for his pains as he stumbled through the door. Picking himself off the floor he looked at the man. Greased black hair topped a coarse red face, now contorted with brutish amusement as the squat body swung a heavy boot at Martin's body. He jumped aside and managed to avoid most of the force of the kick, but not enough to prevent it hurting. Scrambling onto the stage he reflected with useless bitterness that he was supposed to be a guardian of the law. Behind him, the police slammed the door and followed him onstage; he must have been the last to arrive. He glanced at his watch and saw it was only two minutes after ten.

The other actors were huddled together in a silent group in the middle of the stage. One or two glanced at him furtively before dropping their gaze. He looked around the theatre. The apron stage was an enormous island projecting into a dark pit concealing long rows of plush seating. Martin brought his mind to bear on more important matters. Which of the people milling about him was Macduff? They all seemed so alike, though in itself this was promising. The man simply *had* to bear a rough physical resemblance to himself. He concealed his impatience. He would find out soon enough.

A door beside the one he had used opened; a stir ran through the apathetic actors. The ridiculous appearance of the man who entered would have caused amusement anywhere but in the theatre. Short, fat, and florid; far removed from the norm of well-fed physical perfection shared by most people; the man's beetling brows, pig eyes, and hook nose completed the impression of some prehistoric Neanderthal. The caricature was completed by authentic Elizabethan costume: white ruff, doublet, and red silken hose.

'The Director!' somebody whispered.

The Director strutted half-way across the stage, placed pudgy hands precisely on royal blue hips, and addressed them in a surprisingly high voice.

'You know your parts,' he stated in a no-nonsense voice. 'As I call out the characters, I want the actors to step over here so we can get sorted out.'

'Macbeth!' he called.

Martin covered the twenty metres distance between the Director and the actors, feeling conspicuous.

'Get a move on,' the Director snapped impatiently. Martin fell in beside him; he was a full six inches taller than the other man, and he himself was not particularly tall. The Director reeled off other names; 'Lady Macbeth ... Banquo ...'

The expressions of the other individuals falling in beside Martin betrayed the same hopelessness that he was struggling not to admit to himself. Above the heads of each, the Tracker-birds still hung quietly, death-symbols. They would

be withdrawn, soon, after the hypno-conditioning. Then there would be no need of them. It was a grim thought.

'... Macduff ...'

A man strode arrogantly to the side of the Director from the dwindling group on the other side of the stage. He grinned openly at the Director, to be rewarded with a scowl. Martin considered him carefully, and noted that the other man was of similar build. The relief was considerable. Macduff's thin strong-nosed face was quite similar to Martin's. The other man noticed Martin's examination, and grinned maliciously. He was safe, and he knew it, in the middle of people faced with death or disfigurement. Perhaps he even does it for kicks, thought Martin with a sudden anger which helped him to glare at his would-be killer.

The Director was not finished with his roll-call.

'... Young Seward ...' he called. Martin watched a young man, almost a boy, cross the stage and stand near him. The young man regarded him with an openly fearful expression, and looked away when their eyes met. Momentarily bewildered, he realised with a shock that his own troubles had driven from him the knowledge that he would cause the death of several of the people standing near him. It was a horribly unpleasant thought, and the fact that there was nothing he could do about it in no way lessened his sense of guilt. He blushed and turned his eyes from the young man, only to find Macduff grinning at him. He looked downward, finding the floor a refuge for his complete confusion.

The Director, having them organised to his satisfaction, strutted before them with arrogant self-importance.

'Right,' he snapped. 'I haven't got all morning to waste, so listen to what I've got to say! You are performing this play on the third day of the Festival of the Bard—Blessed be his name! The fat man had inclined his head and muttered the phrase with apparently genuine respect; Martin was not disposed to be cynical about his good faith. But the Director immediately resumed his more typical tone of arrogant impatience: 'Shortly you will be directed to the hypnobooths where your parts will be imprinted on your brains. That is routine and will cause no trouble. But there are more serious matters I must—reluctantly—mention.'

His flabby face shook with righteous indignation, and his pig eyes glittered.

'Last year,' he announced disbelievingly, 'no less than five deaths on stage were bungled. Knives in the wrong place, incorrect dosages of poison, people dying too soon—a complete shambles. An unprofessional mess.' His tone was horrified, his professionalism affronted. 'Antony, for example, died immediately he fell on his sword, and failed to live long enough to deliver his last lines. The play was ruined. My reputation suffered!'

The director, ending with a high pitched scream, swung round melodramatically on Macduff, pointing with furious accusation.

'Those errors were due to your bungling, Newton. I gave you charge of the hypno-conditioning. Your mistakes almost cost me my reputation as a director of taste and repute!'

His suddenly lowered voice adopted a false, syrupy tone.

'I'm not altogether satisfied with your conduct, Newton. You show signs of an overweening pride unbecoming in one who professes to serve the Bard. I realise you enjoy your small parts in the Plays. Well, you should be careful that you do not find yourself granted a really important

role one of these years!'

The man who had the part of Macduff said nothing; his face white. The Director immediately turned from him and faced Martin.

'That reminds me,' he said, his voice under ostentatious control. 'You, Macbeth. I want no trouble from you. Your offstage—exit—makes no difference. No simulation in the Plays, you must remember. I would also advise you not to make a futile effort to oppose Macduff. It isn't worth it.'

It was Martin's turn to shudder. The matter-of-fact manner in which he'd been told to be a good boy and behave at his own execution made him feel sick. He told himself weakly; they probably say that to everyone just to get them down.

The Director regarded the others.

'Those of you who are to die in the name of the Bard'—again, he bowed, and Martin was horribly certain that the respect was no pose—you will find that we are not ungenerous. If you leave any loved ones behind you, they are entitled to your mortal remains, and also to a small percentage of the box-office takings. You merely have to sign the necessary forms in triplicate in my office. You may come after your hypno-conditioning. That's all. Thank you for your attention.'

The Director spun on his heel and swept through his door with attempted grace.

One of the police officers; not, Martin realised with relief, the older man who had kicked him; led him through the same door. 'Can't have you getting your lines wrong eh?' the man said in a friendly enough fashion, grinning. 'We've got a booth all ready for you.' He continued in garrulous manner, 'impossible to believe that they used to have to learn their parts by heart, eh?'

In the passage beyond the door were a series of glass-fronted booths, each of which contained a padded chair and headpieces. 'You got Macbeth set up yet?' the policeman demanded of a white-coated technician lounging against a booth.

The man nodded indolently. Backed by the powerful theatre unions, he had less to fear from the police than had most citizens. 'Okay. Just a minute.' He turned to Martin. 'Hey, you!' He indicated the first booth in the row. 'Inside here. You're going in first because your part takes a longer conditioning.'

Martin suppressed resentment of the man's insolence and did as he was told. He knew roughly how the device worked; it impressed the part, as recorded by a past actor onto a master tape, on the brain of the actor. The main drawback of the system was that the actor came to believe himself to be the part he was to play. The depth of these schizoid delusions varied according to the strength of the character to be portrayed.

Macbeth had been an exceptionally powerful character.

Martin's head fitted neatly between the headpieces which contained the hypno-conditioner induction plates. The attendant bent over him with a hypodermic in hand.

'This'll take fifteen minutes.' He gestured at the hypodermic.

'It's better if you're not conscious during the conditioning.' Martin let him inject a colourless liquid into a vein at the crook of his right arm. The attendant stepped outside, and shut the door. He flipped a switch on the control panel outside the door. Martin felt his consciousness leave him.

Now he was Martin-Macbeth. He was sitting in a hypno-

booth in 21st century London, but at the same time he was Macbeth, a wild Scottish thane of the 13th century. He was wild, ambitious, and intensely proud, and he revelled in his self-awareness of his power. But . . . certain strange things were happening to him . . .

He'd fought a battle, and now he talked with three old crones on the bleak Forbes moors. Now, somehow, he was in his own Inverness castle, planning a deed, and clutching the dagger necessary for its execution. It was done, confusion, dream-like, swept through him. Now he sensed he was no longer Thane, but King. King, and gaining no pleasure from the fact. . . Macbeth's once noble savagery was degenerating into tyranny, suspicion, and fear. Murder, ghosts, and terror. Another visit to the strange old hags. MORE MURDER. Deaths, the agony of sick and diseased minds.

Dunsinane Castle and—Birnam Wood, advancing—

Macduff, unreasoning terror. Die Like A Man.

Then suddenly—bleak—empty—NOTHINGNESS. Oh God!—No—NO!—

Martin-Macbeth awoke screaming, the falling sword gleaming above his face his last memory. Buried in his mind too was the knowledge that he could not hope to evict from his brain this foul eleventh century stranger.

He shivered in 21st century London, and sweated freely. Stray thoughts ran through his brain. 'Why should I play the Roman fool?' he asked himself, and then caught himself angrily. Those were Macbeth's words. The alien part of him. He was John Martin. John Martin. John Martin. But, with pride, he thought; I am greater by far than the people of this time with their miserable lives! He caught himself once again and was trembling in an effort to control his wayward mind when the door of the booth opened.

The attendant was not surprised. 'Macbeth always hits them like that!' he told the policeman in a conversational tone. He grinned. 'But you should see what Caliban does to them. Or Puck. Or the witches in this play, for that matter!'

When Martin-Macbeth was assisted out of his booth he saw a familiar figure emerging from a neighbouring booth. Macduff! He growled like an animal, and charged his hated enemy. The policeman caught him up in a half nekson with the ease of long practice. Macduff turned and saw the other man, he was immediately gripped by the attendant as his eyes bulged and he spat. 'You! Hell-bound! Yet I slew ye . . .!'

'It's taken alright,' said the attendant in a bored voice. 'We can call the Tracker-birds off now.' The policeman holding Martin-Macbeth nodded, and the two antagonists were dragged away from each other in an obviously well-established routine. Martin gradually gained control of his mind and remembered where he was. The policeman led him into the passage from which Martin had first entered the stage and they stopped before a door numbered 5.

'This is your dressing-room,' he told Martin. 'You come here to prepare for your part before the performance. You go in first, we don't want trouble with the others.' Surprisingly, he smiled as he opened the door and stood back for Martin to enter. 'Confusing, isn't it? I've done some bit parts, so I always ask to get on Theatre Duty this time of year. You might say I like studying human nature . . .'

Martin didn't appreciate his philosophical advances, and entered the room. It was about five metres by three, containing three grey wall closets, a wall mirror, two tubular

steel chairs with canvas seats drawn up to a scratched deal table. One of the chairs was occupied by a small man regarding Martin without apparent curiosity.

'This is Foster,' the policeman told Martin. 'He'll take care of you, help you get ready for the part, get you your equipment, and so on. I've got to go and round up more people. I'll be back in fifteen minutes. Meanwhile, work out your part with Joe here.' He grinned. 'And get to know this room, you'll use it for your Grand Exit!'

This was more than Martin had dared hope for. He studied Foster's dark unsmiling face with care before committing himself. The man was about forty, and surely corruptible. He had to take a bribe. Martin refused to recognise how slender his chance was.

'This where I come at the end of my part with—with Macduff?' he asked.

Foster's nod was the slightest of head movements.

Martin's frankness was born of desperation.

'Tell me,' he demanded, 'how much do you get paid?'

'Not much.' Was there the faintest hint of a smile on the man's face?

'Would you like to earn some more?' asked Martin, licking dry lips.

'Depends what for...'

'Well... to stay out of here when I come in with Macduff during the play. And to make sure nobody else is here either. It's worth fifty quid if you agree...'

Foster's heavy eyebrows lifted slightly. 'Fifty?' he enquired.

Martin thanked God he'd saved money from his philosophy fellowship and started to haggle. Ten minutes later, when the policeman returned, they had tried on his stage clothes. 'Getting on alright?' he asked, with a knowing leer that made Martin's blood run cold. 'Yes, fine,' he muttered, eyes averted.

'Time for you to leave,' said Foster, slipping a red armband onto Martin's left sleeve. 'Keep this thing on. When the Macbeth part of you gets troublesome—as he will—people will understand why you're acting funny when they see the armband. Oh, and because the Tracker-bird's off don't try making a break. Your conditioning won't allow for it, Macbeth doesn't like cowards.'

Martin, heating up at this remark, could feel Macbeth inside his skull, dangerous, like a caged lion released by excess of emotion. He let the policeman lead him out, refraining from a wink of complicity at the impassive Foster. It's all in his hands now, he thought: I hope the man stays bought. He was taken out by a side-entrance, the only trouble being an encounter with Young Siward, who snarled and lashed out with his feet against his killer-to-be. Macbeth arose dangerously, but he was hurried on and out. The policeman told him when to report back on Tuesday night and Martin left, feeling much more confidence that he had any right to...

The armband was a mixed blessing. While it caused some people to give him a wide berth, it gave others just the incentive they needed to bait a victim of the Plays. His flat in the giant megablock was soon a besieged area, for the news of his selection had spread quickly, granting him a spurious fame which did nothing but enrage him and allow the Macbeth persona to take control of his mind. When he left his flat he was surrounded by the inevitable crowds determined to see, hear, touch, and provoke this strange creature from another time. 'Oh, no, Mr. Martin,' giggled his next-door neighbour, 'we wouldn't miss your perform-

ance for the world. We're very proud of you.'

The mockery concealed a strange jealousy. The theatre might mean death, but it also meant transient fame in an anonymous world; it gave momentary insignificance to lives rendered insignificant by overpopulation and technological coddling. His selection gave his neighbours a unique opportunity to bask in four days of reflected glory which they were determined not to miss. A tri-d network filmed a newsreel in the building; giving a neighbour called Vandenburg the limelight for the first and last time in his life.

'No,' he told the cameras with delighted horror, 'we never realised that our Mr. Martin was a—a subversive!'

On Sunday a megablock wit stood outside Martin's door and, surrounded by an admiring crowd, began to scream Macduff's lines in the hope of exciting Macbeth: 'Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripped'. Martin-Macbeth rushed out of his flat and it took a dozen excited human beings to tear him away from his suddenly terrified tormentor. Throughout that day and the following, there was a crowd outside his flat, hammering and banging at his door until he would lose his self-control and allow Macbeth to physically assault them. His hypno-conditioned skills included knowledge of every variety of fighting, and several of his tormentors suffered physical damage which they later agreed was made just about worthwhile by the experience!

The strain was intolerable. Sleep became difficult to attain, and sleep had especial significance for Macbeth. On Sunday night he awoke to hear himself shouting: 'Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep!'

During the brief periods in which he had control of his own mind, he wound up his affairs. He demanded immediate cremation for his body, naturally he didn't want anyone checking up on dead bodies were his plan to succeed. He resolutely refused to realise that his self-control, virtually gone as it was even now, would in all probability disappear altogether once he got inside the theatre on Tuesday night. He resigned his philosophy fellowship at the university, and noted that half a dozen of his colleagues had done likewise. Intellectual free-thinking was not considered desirable. Also, he read up everything he could find on the theory of fighting with the clumsy broadswords that Macbeth would be using. His induced ability to employ this weapon would, he presumed, be removed along with the rest of the Macbeth alter ego at the moment of his death as Macbeth in the dressing-room. It would be as well to surprise a conditioned Macduff, waiting to kill a helpless deconditioned John Martin, with a sword fighting ability above anything the other could expect.

Finally, he relearned the final part of Macduff's performance, the few short lines he spoke upon entering with the tyrant's head. But these he had to know to perfection. The slightest deviation from the hypno-conditioned norm, and the game would be up. The task was rendered difficult because Macbeth persisted in dominating his mind whenever he began to think in terms of Macduff. Only with the aid of heavy doses of tranquillisers could he control his dangerous alter ego.

By Monday night he was as well prepared as possible, and mercifully, he was left alone with his books and the never-silent wall-screens for the whole evening.

Emerging into Oxford Street late on Tuesday afternoon, unable to delay departure from the coast to the ancient central jumble of buildings in the metropolis any longer, he stepped onto the wide pavement bordering the crowded

walkways. The red armband seemed to burn a hole through his arm, and the stares of curious eyes on every side bored into him. Sadistic morons! he thought, his indignation giving the Macbeth alter ego the opportunity to surge into control. Hag-ridden crone-spawn! Clenching his teeth, he strained physically to push the furious violence of the alien mind into a safe corner of his mind, and had partly succeeded as he stepped onto the Walkway leading in the general direction of the Theatre. One last wishful thought of taking a Walkway leading in the opposite direction was suppressed with finality when Macbeth, as he was supposed to do, sent a blast of absolute rage through his skull at such a thought. Martin almost blacked out under its force and lurched off the slowest Walkway strip; he had plenty of time and could walk the distance easily. In fact, he had to find something to do to pass the time.

Disregarding a newsdventing machine which was trumpeting about the riots attending a performance of Goethe's Faust in Northern EuroFed the previous night, Martin spotted the flashing neon signs of a cinema fifty metres up the road. Weaving his way past the human tide flowing in the other direction and mostly halting to point and stare on seeing the armband, he made the safe darkness of the cinema foyer without difficulty, slipped coins into the vending machine, and was passed through the turnstiles into the darkness inside. In his haste to get out of the crowd he had forgotten to see what the programme was.

But within a few lines of dialogue, he had recognised the play.

Richard III. He groaned involuntarily and shut his eyes. He couldn't get away from murder and bloodshed anywhere.

He opened his eyes to the scene about him in resigned fascination; and, stumbling to a seat, he sat down. The theatre was nearly full.

He was standing just below the grassy crest of a small hill under a cloudy sky. Tufts of grass moved in the breeze, and over the crest was a confused noise of battle and disorder. Bosworth!

A gaunt and tattered figure was silhouetted on the crest of the hill. His strong face was bleeding from several wounds and his long hair was matted. Of medium height; his hunchback, the invention of Tudor propagandists, was not pronounced underneath his hacked-about armour. He stared straight at Martin and implored him with the same desperate words he had used on a hundred other occasions:

'A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!'

Within Martin, Macbeth lurched into semi-control, straining desperately in his feeling of kinship for this beaten wreck of a man. Martin-Macbeth half rose from his seat, eliciting angry murmurs behind him, but with a superhuman effort Martin managed to regain control and seat himself again. Hands shaking, he reached into his pocket and swallowed several trunk pills; there was no guarantee they would be effective for much longer, but they might help. Even he longed to see Richard escape. But of course it was no use. Even as Richard stared with horror at Martin—at everyone—who could do nothing to help him, the erstwhile king of England was surrounded by grim soldiers with drawn and raised swords.

Martin groaned loudly and covered his head with shaking hands. He could do nothing now to control Macbeth, and as Martin-Macbeth he lurched to his feet, mind confused. People on every side shushed and muttered with

annoyance, their reverie of blood and death disturbed. Macbeth's emotions had swamped Martin's mind, but they were totally incoherent, and Martin was able to steer the motive centres of his brain and direct his body, from the back seat as it were, out of the cinema.

Outside, he stood blinking in the late sunlight, trembling with the effort to control his mind and body. The looks and whispers began again, and soon, he knew, he would let Macbeth take over and run his body amok for the sheer animal relief it would afford him.

But it was almost time to be at the theatre, and Macbeth was tugging impatiently at his motive centres, trying to move Martin's legs in the right direction. For a moment Martin felt almost at peace, giving up the struggle, he knew he had obviously lost. 'Alright,' he told himself, 'I'm coming, don't worry.' It was such a relief to abandon the struggle with his own mind even if for only a short while, for he knew well enough that he would fight to the end later on.

He arrived at the correct side door at sixteen minutes to eight, and was passed through by an emotionless gum-chewing policeman. This man escorted him as far as the first checkpoint where he was met by the man who had supervised him on Friday. There was no friendliness today: 'Come on, you've got to get ready. You're on stage in fifteen minutes.'

The hostility and the surroundings allowed Macbeth to surge upwards for control of the kidnapped brain, and Martin fought back to retain control of his own volition. But eventually they came to a corridor Martin-Macbeth remembered well, and Macbeth responded wildly to the memory, and to awareness of the nearness of the ordeal.

'Here's Joe Foster,' said the policeman, pushing Martin-Macbeth before him into dressing-room number 5. 'He'll look after you from now on.' The door slammed behind him, and was locked. Martin-Macbeth gazed at Foster's imperturbable face; the other man gestured at a pile of barbarous clothing lying on the scratched table. 'These are your clothes,' he said, 'you'd better get them on right away.'

Macbeth's eyes gleamed to see the heavy sword in the crude scabbard; he drew it and sliced the air several times. It would do good work! Martin, drowning in Macbeth's personality, was terrified. As he was helped into the crude mediaeval clothing, Martin's self-awareness was receding all the time, encroached upon by Macbeth as every passing second replaced the 21st century with the environment which Macbeth would have regarded as being natural to him. Martin's bodily control had all but gone, he could scarcely manipulate his tongue any more. He turned to Foster, and with a great effort asked, 'you—you remember what we agreed?'

Foster nodded. Martin, exhausted with the effort of imposing his mind on his kidnapped body, gave way to the cold barbarian thoughts flowing through his mind. He could hardly believe that these terrible jealousies and fearful ambitions were not the thoughts of an independent being, but merely those of his own brain, tricked and conditioned into inventing another identity which threatened to destroy his own...

The door opened, interrupting Martin's semi-hysterical thoughts, which he could no longer control. The policeman stuck his head through the opening and nodded at Martin-Macbeth.

'Come on, you. You're on in a minute.' His tone was

peremptory impatient.

A blast of rage swept Martin-Macbeth's brain, tossing Martin's self-awareness aside as his stolen mind identified wholly with the 11th century barbarian. His lips curled with pure rage; his hand dropped to the sheathed broadsword.

'What's this? Thou order'st me though I was a babe!'

The policeman gripped him tightly and nodded to Foster. Between them, the two men hauled Macbeth, helpless and enraged, up the corridor to the stage-door.

WHERE IS THAT CUR MACDUFF?

'They're always the same,' said the policeman in a bored voice as together they pushed Macbeth through the stage-door. 'Wonder if he still knows who he is?'

Martin, imprisoned in a microcosmic corner of his brain, could only wait, hope, pray, and see what would happen...

As if in a vivid dream, that part of Macbeth still aware of itself as Martin was forced to observe its body performing acts over which it had no volition. Legs that no longer belonged to it propelled Macbeth over wild moorland heath, feet sinking into pools of peaty and stagnant water, soaking the crudely stitched leather boots right through. Beside Macbeth, at times obscured by swirling mist, strode his trusted lieutenant, Banquo.

The Martin part of Macbeth was relieved to realise it was aware of what happened, even if only in a detached sense, in which its senses operated in circumscribed yet exotic fashion. It was crushed at the back of what it had used to regard as its own brain; crushed by the strength of an alien and savage mentality. It sensed the external world rather than saw, tasted, felt, touched, or smelt. And the impressions formed by Macbeth were so powerful that each mental blow hurt it mortally.

It sensed Macbeth's amazement on encountering the three withered hags, and his ambition stimulated by their prophecies; ambition tempered by jealousy and foreboding attendant upon their prophecies for Banquo. These emotions lay at the back of Macbeth's mind, seeds with monstrous potential. The Martin consciousness felt something analogous to shame at the crimes it knew its body was destined to commit in the name of such emotions.

But the moorlands had vanished and Macbeth was elsewhere. Its spatial and temporal perceptions were nullified, scenes flowed past it like water under a bridge. Now Macbeth clutched a dagger; the Martin consciousness was agonised with fore-knowledge, but it was powerless, controlled by Macbeth as he was controlled by induced ambitions. The Thane slipped past a sleeping guard in the hall of his Forres castle into a bedroom, steadied himself above a sleeping old man, then plunged the dagger down, MURDERING, creeping out, frenzied, mind twisted with shame and ambition, fear and exultation. The Martin awareness lay helpless beneath the oppression of terrifying paranoid emotions, simultaneously sensing the faraway acclamation of some audience at this first of many murders.

Next, calmed, it sensed Kingship. Macbeth was now King of Scotland, yet it gave him no pleasure. Jealousy and fear had laid cancerous siege to his mind with a cancerous malignance; ambition was complemented with mistrust and tyranny. His most faithful lieutenant Banquo—why not so great, and yet greater? He had to be sure that Banquo was eliminated to negate the prophecy.

Banquet. Mind shouting, exploding, primal drunken roistering; Martin-mind hanging on desperately before the

onslaught of the drunken carouse, more than its body could take. Macbeth saw the assassin he had hired approach him across the hall.

'Most royal Sir—Fleance is 'scap'd.'

Banquo's son alive! The Martin cringed under the uncontrolled panic. Macbeth had to sit, but 'the table's full'—no room anywhere.

'Here is a place reserved Sir.' The tone was puzzled, courteous. The voice's owner gestured at a seat, but the seat, it was...

PANIC—'Which of you has done this?' Macbeth was on the edge of collapse, and the Martin consciousness was all but lost in the eddying turmoil of despair, buried beneath the consciousness of words repeated over and over again. BANQUO SITS THERE. YET HE WAS DESPATCHED BUT AN HOUR AGO. Macbeth stared at the bloody features and accusing finger of the dead Banquo in terror.

'Thou canst not say I did it: never shake thy gory locks at me.'

The Martin consciousness flickered and almost faded as it was dashed against the reefs of Macbeth's whirlpool insanity; it was not aware of the external world. But the terror receded slightly, and a measure of sanity and light returned. Macbeth again spoke with the three hags. Strange prophecies; optimism, yet more murders.

The Martin mind warily entered the arena of a temporarily sane mind. Macbeth had realised his defeat, and this banished the jealousies and ambitions; leaving a curious emptiness and a strange dignity. His wife had died, and '...life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more...' The Martin mind relaxed, opening itself to that greater serenity that was Macbeth. It watched the approach of a servant.

'I looked toward Birnam, and anon methought I saw the wood begin to move.'

The new rush of panic desperately hurt the Martin mind. It no longer cared to cling to life, for this alien monster existed to rape the mind that it, Martin, had once called its own. But the fury ended; Macbeth decided to die as befitted his true nobility. Surrounded. A brief encounter, one down. 'Why should I play the Roman fool, and die on mine own sword?'

MACDUFF! Confidence, for—'I bear a charmed life, which must not yield to one of woman born.' So the witches had told him. But—Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripped.'

The Martin mind was rocked for one last time under the hammer blow of terror that destroyed all sanity in his usurped brain. But even now, Macbeth's mind cleared to allow concentration for the final fight. It was empty of all hope or ambition, and allowed Martin a certain mental latitude within its skull which it dared to believe might even be HIS; latitude to prepare for The Moment which now it—he—recalled.

Swords ringing, they exited from Dunsinane and the 11th century. The conditioning remained, they approached the dressing room. Macduff, grinning wolfishly, forced the tiring Martin-Macbeth into the room and up against the wall.

Then Macbeth vanished and Martin was again alone in His own mind.

He screamed, with His voice; wrenched by unendurable physical and mental pain. The vacation of the macrocosmic whole of his mind had forced his ego—which had been

crammed into a microcosmic area—to be stretched and expanded outwards, impossibly, a rending expansion in order to re-occupy his own mind. Unbearably tortured, he dropped the sword and fell to the floor. Across his grotesquely twisted face fell the shadow of a raised sword-arm...

Prostrate, he awaited extinction. But the expected blow did not come. Opening blurred eyes which refused to focus, he saw a body crash onto the floor beside him, its head half severed. As he watched, not understanding, a sword descended from nowhere and completed the business. An intolerably loud voice shrieked through his skull like a storm-wind. He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the interruption.

'Get up! You're back onstage in a minute. Get your clothes changed, come on, man, hurry up.' A rough fist punched his arms, his body, forcing him to move, to groan. 'Come on, damn you, get up. You want to go on living?'

Martin was still in no state to care. He was roughly hauled to his feet, his face was slapped sharply. He opened his eyes again, "...whatchawant...?" he mumbled. Joe Foster had propped him against the table; he tumbled into a chair as the other man stripped the gory corpse of Macduff, taking care that the costume was not drenched too drastically by the gouts of blood. He shook Martin.

'Get your clothes and your face-mask off! Quick!' He slapped Martin, at last imbuing him with a sense of urgency. He clambered out of Macbeth's costume, clumsily, and was assisted into Macduff's costume by Foster; who put on him the other man's face-mask, shoved the gory head of the decapitated Newton-Macduff into his still trembling hands, and pushed him to the door.

'You're on now. Afterwards, go to room number 10, take this man's clothes, and get out. Leave the head in here first. Now get out of here!'

Driven by a sudden sense of urgency, Martin ran up the passage, and barely managed to make his entry at the right time. Nobody else had been in the passage, nobody else had seen the incident. In the front row of the audience which he could now, deconditioned, see; he could spot some of the police who had shepherded the actors around; these plays are nothing more than popular public executions; he thought. Abruptly he began to wonder why Foster had helped him; he had been paid to stay out of the way at the crucial moment. That would have been useless. Could he have had a conscience about taking his money knowing he never had a chance? Martin doubted this very much. He owed Foster his life, but why? Where was the catch?

He acted out the remainder of the tumultuously applauded play without difficulty; as the curtain came down and he started for the dressing-room he was almost caught badly. The conditioning cut out abruptly from the surviving actors, and the shock, while not as severe as in his case, was sufficient to make them gasp and clutch their skulls; to stand trembling while they re-orientated themselves. He imitated their actions, then left the stage first, left the head in grisly state in room number 5, before cautiously pushing open the door of number 10. It was deserted.

Shutting the door, he changed into Newton's street clothes, hung up in one of the closets. They fitted him well, although he disliked the blatantly fashionable high waistlines and puffed sleeves. Inside a zipped inner tunic pocket was a thick roll containing Giraccout tabs, ID card, vouchers, Bank Security number, and a plastic card that read: JAMES NEWTON, EMPLOYEE, THEATRE-

ROYALE, LONDON. Martin shook his head; he was out of his depth. He was certain he had been played for sucker in a game he didn't understand. But all he could do was to play it. He'd have a face-mask made to fit the Newton ID photo, and vanish for a while. So easy...

He left the room with averted face. The door was near the end of the passage, and he slipped out, managing to join the still exiting crowd without encountering police checks. Had he thought about it, the ease of escape might have made him suspicious. As it was, he was already certain that somewhere along the line the whole affair was a put-up job, which wasn't engineered exactly to suit his own ends. He was the bait in some obscurely complicated struggle operating on levels above his head. He emerged outside onto the brightly lit plaza and suddenly rejected out of hand his scheme of vanishing into the crowds and living the life of a degenerate off the streets. There was one place where he would discover what exactly was going on—that was Newton's flat. He had nothing to lose; he should have been dead an hour ago, and even if he was going to put his head in a noose, perhaps it was preferable than the inevitably deadly game of living rat-like off the streets of an uncaring society.

Martin took an Expressway Strip out of town to the north where Newton had lived in a luxury megablock on the edge of the countryside that could still be found if one went far enough. Using the 150KPH strip, he misjudged his exit, and overshot by at least half a kilometre, forcing him to trudge along the concrete pavement beside the north-bound strip until he reached the local Walkway leading to the Megablock. Heart pounding uncomfortably, he took the lift up five floors to the penthouse address given on Newton's ID card. Inserting the key sliver he'd found in the dead man's clothes, he pushed open the door.

The light was already on, he stepped inside and stood loosely, resigned to whoever it was that awaited his arrival. The door shut behind him, he turned to see the young policeman who had looked after him in the theatre. Behind him, sprawled out in police uniform in an easy chair against the wall, was Joe Foster.

Martin, no longer surprised by anything, sat down calmly in one of the chairs placed round the heavy antique wooden table in the middle of the living room.

'Hello', he said without emotion. I suppose I expected to find you here.'

Joe Foster smiled at this, leaned forward and offered Martin a Mescalahale which the other refused; he'd had quite enough trouble with people fooling about with his mind. Foster shrugged and lit up one himself, spoke to the policeman standing by the door, 'Brady, get Mr. Martin a drink. I'm sure he could do with one.'

Martin could, and gratefully accepted the whyskick he was handed.

'I admire your self-possession,' said Foster, 'but perhaps you've reached the stage where nothing can surprise you any further?' Martin nodded, smiling slightly. He, too, was surprised at his own composure; he didn't know whether it was something new he'd discovered within himself, or merely the numbing effects of a series of violent shocks.

'I'm sure you want to know what it's all about?' asked Foster. He didn't wait for an answer, blew out a cloud of Mescalahale smoke, studied it as it ballooned off the low ceiling. 'Of course, you realise we used you? You probably also realise that just about everyone chosen for Macbeth

gets the same idea as you did? Bribery. But they all get their allotted fate, which isn't always what they think it is...

Martin had realised this; curiously, it didn't hurt his pride. Pride seemed a ridiculous extravagance seeing that he was still alive. Foster watched him and smiled slightly: 'yes, you see it all, don't you?' Then he went on to explain other matters. Martin did his best to provoke explanation.

'You had a feud—a feud with Newton—the man playing Macduff?' he suggested.

Foster, indolent as a lizard yet as sharp, explained that Newton was affiliated to the Theatre Unions. He assumed that Martin understood that the theatres were the basis for much of the popular support for the government, and apologised for explaining that the great mass of the population couldn't care one way or the other about the system which governed them so long as they were entertained.

'So we have to buy their valuable support, with massive state-supported enterprises of the crudest kinds, of which the theatres provide a good example. But the Theatre Unions have gained a degree of autonomous power; they realise that without them the executive would fail to gain the active support of the people—which is necessary even in this electronic day and age. So the Unions can blackmail the State into allowing them measures of political control which of course are always encroaching on the prerogative of the executive. And we—as servants of the State—his tone was needlessly ironic—are engaged in fighting this encroachment—as secretly as possible, of course. It would not be politic to allow signs of a spirit in the body politic to appear to the public.'

Martin drained the last of his whysick and the attentive policeman immediately dialled for and handed him another. Martin, accepting it, was strangely aware of a reversal of roles—two hours or so previously, this man had represented the forces of oppression. Now—what did he represent?

Joe Foster crossed his legs, hitched himself slightly further up in the chair, and continued. 'James Newton was engaged in political fiddling of one kind and another, out for himself, trying to feather his own nest at the expense of the system he worked in. He had to go, and since theatre staff cannot be compelled to take fatal roles in plays, his death had to appear accidental. So we arranged matters to make it appear that you'd done the impossible and overcome the conditioning, to surprise and kill Newton. Since he was responsible for the conditioning for that play, and since he made a mess of a play last year, it will be regarded as just about possible...'

'Yes,' interrupted Martin, 'but this political fiddling—what was it?'

Foster smiled. 'Well, you see, I'm coming to the melodramatic bit now. You should always leave that to the end!' He stubbed out the Mescahale, stopped smiling.

'Newton was after a coup de grace of sorts. His ambition was quite as boundless as your Macbeth's was. He wanted control of the Theatre Unions, and probably a lot more than that. He'd have been nothing more than a harmless lunatic, except that there were secrets he knew and in order to get where and what he wanted he was threatening to reveal these secrets to the public. And if he had, he'd have brought the whole organisation crashing around his own head, and everybody else's too...'

'And this secret?' demanded Martin, determined not to be amazed.

'Okay,' said Foster, 'I'm coming to that. You see, you know those thousands of theatre deaths that the public wallow in every year?'

'Yes,' said Martin, not seeing where the other man was going.

'Most of them are faked.'

Eh?

'Yes. Faked. A few are killed, it's true. A very small number. Most of the rest, supposed killed, get a fresh start somewhere...'

'New set of memories, I suppose,' said Martin with an outburst of bitterness.

'No need,' said Foster. 'People individual enough to criticise this system are no use to anybody if their minds are removed.' He smiled. 'Why, I remember making exactly the same plan as you did when I was in Macbeth nine years ago...'

'What!' yelled Martin, his composure deserting him.

'Think about it. The people best equipped to fight the power of the Theatre Unions are those who've suffered under them...'

There was a sophistry in the argument, Martin realised, but he wasn't disposed to pick semantic holes just then. 'What about me then,' he muttered, 'have I got a future as a cop or something? And what about the theatre? If I'm supposed to have killed Newton...'

Foster regarded him with that Cheshire cat smile which Martin was coming to recognise as being typical. 'You had a philosophy fellowship in political and social doctrines, didn't you? He didn't wait for Martin's nod. 'In that case, I'm sure you feel that it's about time you put your theoretical training to some practical use. Our government is weak, it's divorced from the populace, our whole political system is about to drop into the melting pot. Somehow we must make the transition from centralised to effective local government. I'm sure you can find a lot to do there. You'll get paid for it as well.'

Martin was not convinced. 'But what about the theatre, they're not going to let a murder go just like that?'

'Perhaps they are,' said Foster. 'Once we tell them that your trail vanished in the middle of the metropolis, they won't worry. Newton was as much an embarrassment to them as he was to us. I think both sides will maintain a tactically agreed silence on the whole subject. And possibly, anybody else getting the same ideas will think twice about it...'

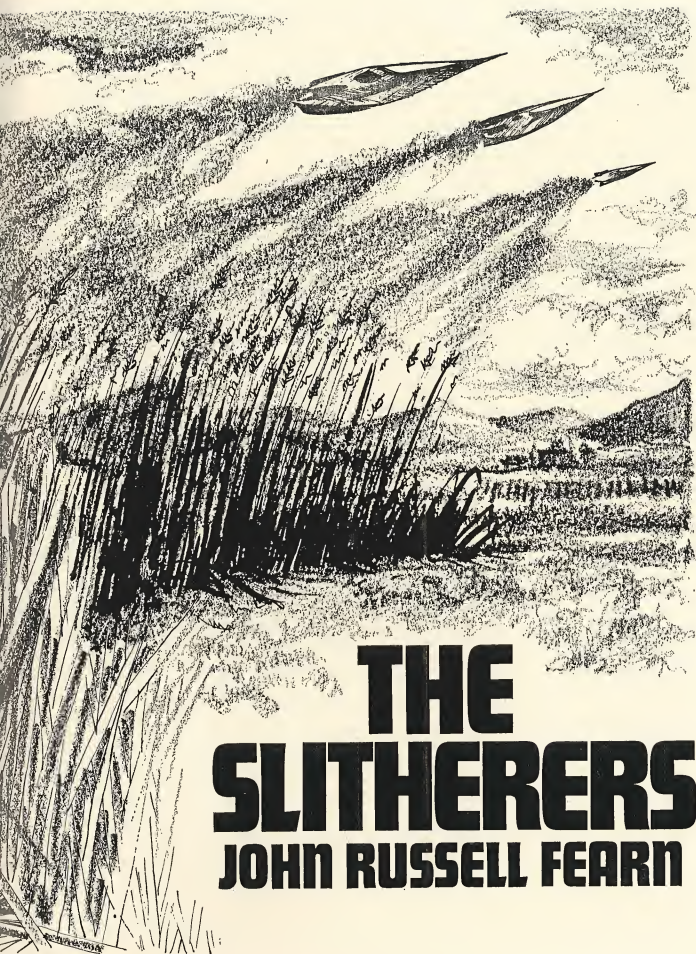
Foster rose. 'But all the same,' he said. 'It might not be too good an idea for you to be found here, in Newton's flat. It would seriously strain the imagination of our Public Relations Department to get you out of that. So perhaps we'd better get along. We can fix you up with temporary accommodation, introduce you to the people you'll be working with, and so on.' He stopped, his hand on the door. 'Oh, that is, if you want to work on this...'

He didn't seriously expect a refusal.

Martin said, with a broad smile, 'Well, I hardly seem to have any much choice in the matter, do I?' Which was answer enough.

And had he needed consolation for this, which he didn't, he might have reflected that the most freely willed of actions are always inevitable.





THE SLITHERERS

JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

It isn't usual to see a dome of blue glass perched in the middle of the tranquil English countryside. I ran across it one blazing July afternoon. It happened after I had toiled up a long slope which looked as though it had once been a paved roadway.

And there was the glass dome—a monstrous, silent thing. I reckoned it was twenty feet in height—but the odd thing was that there seemed to be no way of getting into it. For nearly an hour I prowled around this huge black greenhouse, taking a photograph or two, and all the time wondering how it came to be here in lonely countryside. It seemed to be of one-way glass for I could see nothing through it. It just reflected the flaming midsummer sun in its pearly black dome.

I had got to a local pub for sandwiches before I asked about it. It seemed to me as I tackled beer and sandwiches that mine host ought to know something about it.

'Is it some sort of building?' I asked him.

'No, it ain't that,' he said finally, thumbs in the strings of his apron. 'It's a shield—an' a sort of monument, too. A monument to something mighty queer what happened when I was a nipper.'

I judged he was in the sixties, I waited for the next.

'What age might you be, sir?' he asked presently.

'Me? I'm thirty-two.'

'Aye—a young 'un. You wouldn't be born when the Slitherers was here. That dome was used to deal with 'em.'

I drank my beer slowly and then asked, 'What in hell are Slitherers?'

'That's the funny thing. Ain't nobody as knows exactly —'cept maybe some of them scientific fellers. I did hear tell it might ha' bin the end of the world if they hadn't built that blue dome yonder.'

'Tell me more,' I invited—and promptly he pulled up a stool and started talking ... And talking.

In 1972 the old business of flying saucers reared itself again—this time with a veritable flock of the strange craft in March. They were sighted moving at vast speed and trailing a queer grey smoke screen which settled rapidly into dense mist. Measures were taken—uselessly. The world's fastest 'planes and guided missiles were powerless to keep up with the disk-shaped objects, and in most cases the mist-screen acted as a complete visual blanket.

That was all. The banner headlines faded out. Dispersing grey mist was left behind. There didn't seem to be rhyme or reason to the flying saucer advent until a write up on a big agricultural conference revealed that the price of wheat would have to undergo radical change because every farmer was growing wheat over nine feet high!

It was unbelievable, and yet it was a fact. Fertilizers and modern methods just couldn't account for this gargantuanism, and in the main farmers did not know whether to be pleased or worried about the matter—but certainly the financial aspect demanded revision. For every acre of wheat there was now three times the natural yield.

All sorts of bright ideas were suggested, and all sorts of explanations, but finally the British Ministry of Agriculture sent one Hartley Norcross, an analytical chemist in the scientific division, to investigate. So came Hartley Norcross to Coxwold in Hertfordshire, the heart of the farming community. Here, Norcross talked with, lived with, worked with, and drank with farmers, in the lanes, in their homes, in their fields, and in their pubs—until the Ministry suspected he was enjoying a country holiday at their expense

and demanded action or an immediate return to London. Faced with this ultimatum Norcross cornered one of the leading farmers in the 'Blue Swan', and explained briefly that London was becoming irritated.

'I've got to get to the bottom of this business, Mr. Henshaw, or else ... What more can you tell me?'

'Nothing, Mr. Norcross, far as I can see. We're all growing wheat the like of which we never saw afore. *All of us!*' Norcross ordered beer. 'Look here, is it only the wheat which is affected?'

'You've seen my farm and pastures.'

'I know, but I concentrated on the wheat. What about other things—like turnips, carrots, and potatoes?'

'Big yield, but it ain't outside.'

'How does barley behave?'

'All right.'

Norcross slitted his eyes. He took a drink of his beer. He was a small, officious little man with a long nose, and he had an enormous lot of the ferret in him.

'It's queer,' he said presently. 'The wheat has gone mad and yet the barley's okay. One could picture some kind of fertilizer which has an unusually powerful property causing the giantism; but it wouldn't single out wheat and leave barley untouched. That's what doesn't make sense.'

'No. But then nothing does in this business.'

'Would you say,' Norcross persisted, 'that each plant has an individual plan of nourishment? I mean, would a fertilizer for turnips act equally well for—say, rose bushes?'

'It might and it might not.' Henshaw was definitely a man of the soil and not given to speculation. 'There is rose bushes and rose bushes.'

'You say the wheat is perfect? It's not deprived of essential stamina through being outside?'

'No. Everything's there ...' Henshaw added menacingly, 'If you ask me, Mr. Norcross, it's a warning! There'll be a famine after this and the good Lord is giving us a chance to fill our storehouses.'

Norcross was a materialist so he didn't argue. Instead he did what he should have done earlier—took samples of soil and fertilizer used on Henshaw's fields back to the Ministry laboratories. Not that this did much good, either, for the analysis showed the fertilizer to contain all the ingredients one expects in a good plant food—barring one ingredient, which was presumably a secret of the manufacturers.

This one ingredient worried Norcross more than somewhat. When he had completed his analysis he sat at his bench, forgotten pipe between his teeth, studying the results of his work.

'Nitrates, phosphates, sodium ... They're all here,' he told himself. 'But what the hell's *this* one?'

This 'one' had no name and was brownish grey when detached from its neighbour elements. It refused to respond to any reagent, and as far as Norcross could tell it did not enter into any of the known tables of elements either. It had something of the quality of brown dung, yet it wasn't that, either.

Finally Norcross rang up the manager of one of the biggest fertilizer concerns in the country. From him he got a full formula of the fertilizer, but when Norcross came to check up on it the brown substance was not even mentioned.

'Something,' Norcross mused, 'has been added to the fertilizer before Henshaw and other farmers got it ... but

what the hell is it?

His next move was the electron microscope. He studied the stuff and compared it with all the known plates and photographs of different fertilizing material, yet nowhere was there even a near-match. The stuff looked like some sort of animal matter—not unusual in fertilizer—but if it wasn't put there by the makers where had it come from? And how did it happen to be selective enough to choose wheat in preference to anything else?

Quite frankly, Norcross did not know what to make of it—and neither did other experts throughout the world, as Norcross soon found when he got into contact with them. There was always that unaccountable brown ingredient, totally unexplained.

Meanwhile, amidst the titanic cornstalks of Coxwold, life was continuing as usual. The harvest was so advanced, and so unnatural, that farmer Henshaw and his neighbours were already garnering the results of their labours. A quarter of the cornfields lay bare, showing promise of a second amazing crop under the sweltering sunlight. There were holiday-makers assisting in the harvest, and two of them—the youngest in the batch—those one particularly hot afternoon to have their tea in the shelter of the cornfield which had been unready.

There was nothing unusual about this, since there was ample shelter from the sun amidst the lusty yellow growths. So they ate and drank, and lounged, a youth and a teenage girl, glimpsing occasional cobalt sky as the wind stirred the fantastic corn over their heads.

'Harry,' the girl said, thinking, 'Harry, isn't it a bit queer about this corn? About it being so big, I mean.'

Harry shrugged, dismissing the problem with the inconsequence of youth. He went on eating his sandwiches and said nothing. The girl Rita drained a mineral water bottle and then flung it on one side. It vanished immediately amongst the growths and Harry gave a grim look.

'That's going to be a nice thing for the reaper to hit up against!' he commented. 'Better pick it up, Rita. What's all the good of these signs about keeping the countryside tidy?'

Rita muttered something and scrambled to her feet, clutching to herself a half unwrapped parcel of meat-paste sandwiches. She went through the yellow undergrowth in search of the mineral bottle and Harry watched her go. He noticed how incredibly the cornstalks towered over the girl, their stems as thick as bamboo canes... Then Rita returned, empty bottle in one hand and unwrapped parcel of sandwiches in the other.

'You and your bottle!' she protested. 'I've lost half my sandwiches in getting it back!'

She sprawled down again and Harry looked at her curiously.

'Lost half your sandwiches? How do you mean?'

'They fell out of the paper! That's what I mean!'

'Couldn't you have picked them up?'

'What! Covered in dirty old fertilizer! You know how it sticks to meat paste!'

'Um,' Harry said, and let the subject drop...

So, presently, they resumed their labours in the cornfield, and they did the same next day and the day after that as the weather continued blazingly fine. Each day they went to the slowly diminishing area of cornfield for their tea break, Rita taking extra care of her sandwiches and mineral bottle disposal.

'Pity the holidays are finished tomorrow,' Harry com-

mented, chewing slowly. 'I don't feel a bit like returning to city life.'

'No more than I do,' Rita lay back, hands behind her head, gazing at the tracery of sunny blue sky overhead. 'Harry, why is it always a struggle to get hold of money? If we had plenty we could do as we like.'

Harry did not reply. He was staring fixedly into the depths of the cornstalks. Presently he shut his eyes and then opened them again.

'Must be the heat,' he muttered.

'How does the heat make it hard to get money?' Rita asked. 'That doesn't even begin to make sense.'

'Neither does what I'm looking at.'

The queer note in Harry's voice forced Rita to alertness. She followed the direction of his gaze into the bamboo-like jungle, and for a while failed to discern what was so fascinating him. Then she saw it—or rather them. Reddish-brown objects like tadpoles, darting up, down, and around the cornstalks with such prodigious velocity that they were a mere blur. Sometimes there seemed to be only a couple of them; then at others a good dozen. It was difficult to tell.

'What are they?' Rita demanded.

'Dunno. Sort of dragon-flies.'

Dragon-flies without wings? Things that didn't even *look* like dragon-flies? Things that travelled with terrific speed, darting about like minnows?

'How many are there? Some instinct got Rita slowly on to her feet.

'No idea. About a dozen, I think.'

Rita looked for a little while and then shuddered. She did not know why she felt revolted: she just *did*.

'They're—horrible!' she ejaculated suddenly. 'Look at the way they just *slither* round and over everything!'

'So they do!' Harry had not noticed it before, but the things were definitely serpentine in their movements, yet faster than any reptile ever created. Suddenly he realised that he didn't know what they were. He was fairly knowledgeable on matters of Nature, but this had him stymied.

'I'm going to take a closer look,' he said finally, and with sudden resolution strode forward. Rita half made to follow him then that curious inner instinct warned her to stay put.

No such instincts assailed the materialistic Harry. He went close to the blur of brown objects and watched them intently. In the brief seconds of the creatures' repose he could see a tiny, froglike face with beady eyes and a tightly clamped mouth. The things didn't somehow look harmful.

'Queer,' Harry confessed to himself, and turned to go—but that was as far as he got.

As though shot from a gun three or four of the creatures literally flung themselves at him like tiny projectiles—and they stuck. With the tenacity of leeches they clung to his forehead and temples, resisting all his efforts to brush them off.

The instant Rita saw what had happened she stood for a moment in sheer horror, staring at the objects depending from Harry's forehead—then she swung round and fled through the cornstalks to the freedom of the fresh air and sunshine. There she slowed up, waiting with mixed feelings for Harry to appear. Here she felt safer: in the distance the other harvesters were joking and having their tea.

Moments passed. Rita waited. Then Harry came stumbling into view, groping his way with the uncertainty of a blind man. The slithering objects were no longer anchored to his forehead, but there were bloodstreaks where they

had been . . . Rita took a step backwards, immensely uncertain of herself.

Harry looked at her, but for some reason he did not speak. He still had the blind man's way of walking, feeling his way in front of him as though there were a barrier—and at every step he took Rita became convinced of something horrible.

This was not Harry. It couldn't be. The drooling lips, the mindless stare of his eyes, the uncertain movements. He looked an idiot, in every sense of the word.

Suddenly he fell, and stayed fallen. He was not unconscious; he was just incapable of movement . . . Rita began to run towards the harvesters, then in the midst of it she suddenly didn't know anything more . . .

When Rita came to again she found the sun well down, and she was lying on a couch in farmer Henshaw's parlour. He himself was at the table, stern and worried. Across the room against the sunset stood his wife.

Rita stirred, and the movement brought Henshaw to her. The troubled lines on his weathered face relaxed somewhat. 'Better, Miss Haslam,' he asked.

'Yes—much better.' Rita frowned to herself. 'I fainted or something, didn't I?'

'Yes—you fainted. In fact you've been unconscious for quite a long time,' Mrs. Henshaw made the statement as she came to her husband's side.

'I'm all right now,' Rita said, with more conviction than feeling. 'How's Harry? Is he all right now, too?'

'Harry,' the farmer said quietly, 'is dead.'

Rita stared. 'Dead? Dead! But he *can't* be! There was nothing that could have killed him.'

Farmer and wife looked at one another. Then Henshaw avoided Rita's eyes as he spoke.

'We picked up Harry just after you had fainted. He couldn't even speak. There was a look in his eyes which was . . . Well, just nothing. The sort of look you'd expect from a person who's born loony. He couldn't even walk. So we lifted him up and he didn't show any fight. We called the ambulance and they took him to hospital. I heard an hour ago that he died. I've just come from breaking the news to his people.'

Rita said nothing. She just looked straight in front of her.

'The boy couldn't suddenly have lost his reason like that!' Mrs. Henshaw declared. 'Doesn't make sense . . .'

Silence. A queer conviction of foreboding, of nameless evil lurking somewhere. In the cornstalks, perhaps—

'The—the slitherers!' Rita ejaculated suddenly, jumping up and then swaying giddily. 'The slitherers must have done it!'

'The what?' Henshaw asked sharply.

'That's what I'd call them,' Rita hurried on. 'Tadpoles that move with lightning speed and cling to the flesh like leeches. I remember Harry had some sticking to his head and face.'

'What are you saying?' Mrs. Henshaw's fat arm went gently round Rita's shoulders. 'Is this something you dreamed about that you're telling us?'

'No! Of course it isn't!' Rita's voice was sharp with near hysteria. 'They were out there in the cornfield where Harry and I had our tea . . .' and she went on to swiftly relate the details.

'I'll look into this!' Henshaw declared abruptly, striding to the door. 'If there are things like that in my cornfield they won't be there long, I promise you! Look after the

girl, Edith.'

Then he was gone. Rita, quivering, sat down again on the sofa and buried her face in her hands.

'I'm sure it was the Slitherers!' she whispered, between her fingers.

'If there's anything there, my husband will find it.' Mrs. Henshaw sat beside her, and at that Rita suddenly jerked up her head.

'He shouldn't have gone, Mrs. Henshaw. *'He shouldn't!'* It's dangerous . . .

'Don't you worry, love. My hubby knows what he's doing.' And as Rita said nothing Mrs. Henshaw added, 'There'll be an inquest about Harry Cotterill, of course, and you'll have to say what happened in the cornfield—but don't let your fancy run away with you. I'll have a word with your parents before the inquest and maybe they can—'

Mrs. Henshaw broke off and Rita sat in frozen silence. For out of the golden evening there had come a scream—the insufferable scream of a strong man overwhelmed. It quivered down into silence and nothing seemed changed.

But Rita knew—and so did Mrs. Henshaw. The Slitherers!

Queer happenings in Coxwold! Overnight, the obscure English village became a sensation spot. Everybody under the sun came to Coxwold asking questions, writing reports, wanting to know this and that. Two healthy men—the only difference being their ages—had met imbecility and death in the cornfields. *Why?*

Rita told her story of the Slitherers—a popular name which soon caught on, and there were prompt investigations into the two acres of corn remaining in the field. Nothing happened. Not a tadpole in sight. Doubt began to grow.

The police in particular were suspicious. There seemed to have been foul play somewhere, yet without evidence their hands were tied. And the Ministry of Agriculture executives were frankly astounded. They were prepared to admit there was something odd, but they certainly didn't credit the yarn about slithering tadpoles.

The upshot was that the long-nosed Hartley Norcross returned to Coxwold, to find it a deserted village. Every house was bolted and barred; every farm and barn was shut tight. Not a soul moved in the hot summer afternoon. Even cattle had been removed. The only living things were the birds and insects.

'Nice hell of a job this is,' Norcross told himself, strolling down the village main street. 'Who am I supposed to be? Sherlock Holmes?'

By no stretch of imagination could Norcross have been bracketed with the famous fictional sleuth, but he certainly was damned inquisitive and he meant to find something in Coxwold even if it killed him.

But, like those before him, he failed to discover a single thing. The village was normal, even if deserted, and the stripped cornfields had nothing unusual to offer. Norcross found himself wandering through the cornfields in the blaze of summer sun, all kinds of theories turning over in his mind. It was at this point that he came upon the crumbled remains of meat paste sandwiches which Rita had let drop some days before in her search for the thrown-away mineral bottle.

Norcross stood looking at the remains, his brows knitted. By now, most of the bread was curled up like old boot

soles and much of it had been pecked away by ever-avid birds. But there were still brown smears of meat paste, fluffy with mold. Norcross did not know why, but something about those bread and meat paste bits interested him, particularly so where brown plant fertilizer had mixed with the meat paste to produce a golden-brown amalgam which gleamed stickily in the sunlight.

Norcross was remembering the fertilizer samples which he had personally analysed, and particularly the unknown brown quantity which had refused to identify itself with any known substance. Suppose—? He squinted into the sunshine, on the edge of a thought. Well, just suppose...

Presently Norcross went down on his knees and prodded at the sticky syrupy substance with the end of a pencil. To his infinite horror the substance—which he assumed was a mixture of meat paste and fertilizer—stirred and jumped visibly as though it had a life of its own.

Quickly Norcross withdrew his pencil and reflected. Perhaps he had been out in the sun too long? No, it wasn't that either, for even as he watched the gummy mess retracted itself and then went through a mysterious gyration. Before his startled eyes something was forming—a small, eel-like body, a blunted head, and two tightly shut eyes. It was no delusion. It was some form of weird life having its birth in the syrupy cocoon that shimmered in the heat.

The guardian angel which watches over drunks and little children must also have whispered something in Norcross's ear at that moment. He began to retreat backwards along the needle points of the chopped cornstalks. When he had reached what he considered was a safe distance he crouched to watch.

Not for long. The thing he had seen forming abruptly rose from the sticky mess which had been its birthplace. It shot to a distance of perhaps twenty feet and then came to a stop in mid-air, hovering. Without wings, without anything. It looked exactly like a slug with the head of a snake. In size it was not particularly big, but it certainly radiated a curious suggestion of evil. It was repulsive, horribly alien.

Norcross licked his lips and waited. At the back of his mind was the thought that Rita Haslam had not been exaggerating. The things *did* exist, but this one—at the moment anyway—did not seem to be doing anything to justify the appellation of 'Slitherer'.

But that was where Norcross guessed wrong. He had just come to this point in his mental debate when the object suddenly moved again, straight for him! It came with the velocity of a bullet and dead on its target. Norcross had only a split second. The thing seemed to be hurtling for his head so he threw up a hand to protect himself. With a resounding impact the thing hit his hand, the back, and struck relentlessly, held by some kind of merciless suction.

Sweating, Norcross shook his hand fiercely, but the hideous-looking thing refused to be budged. So Norcross tore at it with his other hand and still failed to drag it free. At the same time he was conscious of a vague tingling sensation, rather like that generated by a jelly-fish.

'Damn you, get off!' Norcross swore, and slammed his hand down on the sharp bars left by the cornstalks. Jolted with pain the weird object bit savagely taking a piece out of the back of Norcross's hand. He gazed at it stupidly, wondering what was happening in this deserted cornfield.

Then fury and panic really got the better of him. He slapped his bleeding hand against himself, then again and again crashed it down on the cornstalk barbs... Until at

last he got results. Weakened by the onslaught the thing suddenly detached itself, hurtled several feet into the air, and then streaked away towards the north.

Norcross watched it go, his legs shaking. Grimly he pulled out his handkerchief and wrapped it round his bleeding hand while he wondered if there had been venom in the deadly jaws.

The first living thing the isolated Slitherer came across was Sheila Danebury, a little girl of six, on her way from her father's farm to the village of Great Frexton, neighbour village to ill-starred Coxwold. Little Sheila was entirely contented with life as she tripped along, a bunch of wild flowers in her hand, the hot sunlight glancing in her fair hair.

When the Slitherer forced itself on her vision she just stopped and stared at it. It was on the top of a roadside hedge, its sides heaving with the effort of breathing. Actually, it was in a good deal of pain from the savage beating it had received against the cornstalk barbs.

Then Sheila moved, her childish curiosity stirred. The Slitherer watched her advance from its beady eyes—then came that peculiar bullet-like forward movement. It shot from the edge top to Sheila's forehead in a matter of seconds. She crashed instantly to the dust of the lane and struggled for a moment or two to drag the hideous thing from her head. Then she slowly relaxed and became limp... The Slitherer remained on her forehead for a moment or two and then shot skyward, leaving behind a crumpled figure in a dusty cotton frock, her posy of flowers wilting in the sunlight...

It was half an hour later when Norcross came on the scene. From the cornfield he had followed a natural path which took him to the lane, and automatically he came upon Sheila. Instantly he ran forward, felt quickly for her heart, and at the same time looked at the reddish bruise on her forehead... As he had expected, the child was dead.

'Filthy, blasted killer!' Norcross whispered, looking first at the dead child and then at his own bleeding hand.

If he had had any doubts before about following this business to its conclusion he certainly had them no longer. The dead child in the lane was enough for him. He'd solve this mystery if it took him the rest of his life... But for the moment he had to attend to more practical things.

Having no idea where the girl had come from he lifted her into his arms and began carrying her towards the first habitation he should come across—which was the farm from which she had come. In dead silence farmer Danebury and his wife watched as Sheila was laid on the parlour sofa; then the farmer's sharp eyes began to aim questions.

'For the love of heaven, what happened?' he demanded. 'Who—who attacked our Sheila?'

'A Slitherer,' Norcross answered briefly. 'Heard of 'em?' 'Aye,' the wife confirmed, looking up from beside Sheila's body. 'The things that emptied yonder Coxwold.'

'Right!' Norcross wagged his bleeding hand. 'And they're still there—or at least one of 'em was. I'll gamble it was the one which killed your daughter after it attacked me... Got some water? I'd like to wash my hand.'

Only half aware of what he was doing the farmer led the way into a flagged kitchen and Norcross went to work with a pump. Apparently his hand was not poisoned, but it hurt like hell.

'Who are you, mister?' the farmer asked grimly, after a moment or two.

'Hartley Norcross, analytical chemist from the Ministry of Agriculture. I've been sent down to investigate Coxwold.'

'How did you come across my Sheila?'

Norcross aimed a sharp look. 'Don't get off on the wrong tack, my friend. I came across the child accidentally.'

'So you say! I'd like proof of it—!'

Norcross hesitated, then, 'I understand how you feel. You'd better call a doctor and have him take a look at your youngster.'

'Why? She's dead, ain't she? A doctor can't do anything.' 'Unhappily, no, but at least he can give a professional opinion as to the cause of death.'

The farmer hesitated. Obviously he was thinking a good deal, but something in Norcross's expression made him refrain from further comment. Norcross was no murderer, no child sadist. Then again he had a wound on his hand identical to that on the girl's forehead. The same thing that had attacked her had also attacked him.

'I've things to do,' Norcross said curtly. 'I'm going back to the cornfield and see if there are any more of these blasted things. Here!' He raked a card from his wallet. 'Here's where you and the police can get in touch with me.'

Full of grim purpose, Norcross made his way back to the cornfield. When he reached it he approached warily towards the sticky mess he had originally seen—then he stood looking at something that was pretty close to the impossible. There were more Slitherers in the very process of being formed. Norcross counted half a dozen of them—small, tadpolish objects as yet but full of life.

He stood considering. This was something which had no parallel in his experience. He had no weapons, no acid, no anything with which to destroy these things—whatever they were. All he had was a cigarette lighter, and an idea.

Norcross retreated to a short distance, gathered a few dry twigs, and lighted them. There was a puff of smoke in the windless air and then, as he had expected, the corn stubs took the flame to themselves and began to spread a crackling, burning area round the mess where the enigmatic things were evolving.

His eyes were smarting with smoke Norcross watched the blackening, blazing expanse. He knew quite well that the cornfield would soon be entirely in flames—indeed that the fire might spread further—but he considered he was justified—until out of the smoke six full-grown Slitherers came shooting with projectile swiftness.

Norcross saw them just in time and flung himself flat. The six of them shot clean over his head and to his relief showed no signs of coming back. Evidently they were wary of fire... He got to his feet again and plunged through the smoke to the sticky area. It was still there, looking the same as before. The flames had not reached it but had formed a black area round it.

'Analysis,' Norcross muttered. 'That's the only way to try and get the answer...'

With the aid of a tyre lever from his car and an old tin he succeeded in scraping together some of the gummy mess, and then he headed for London, arriving at the Ministry laboratories fifteen minutes before they closed for the night.

He transported his tin through the main laboratory to the particular one in which he worked. Adams, one of his co-workers, watched the performance with interest. Finally he came across the laboratory and peered at the gummy mess in the tin.

'Stinks, doesn't it?' he asked. 'What is it? Car grease?'

'I wish it were,' Norcross answered. 'It's some kind of amalgam from the Coxwold cornfield, and I'll probably be here studying it for the rest of the night. Might even come into your province if biology is all I think it is.' Norcross thought for a moment and then added, 'You know I was sent down to investigate Coxwold. Well, I did—and nearly got myself wiped out doing it.'

Norcross waved his bandaged hand and gave the full story. Adams listened, even though he struggled against incredulity.

'I've heard about these tadpole things,' he said. 'I thought it a lot of rubbish. It seems from your own experience that it isn't. But what are they? Where have they come from?'

'No idea.' Norcross tightened his lips. 'But I'm going to find out! I've still got the memory of little Sheila lying there in the lane with her flowers beside her. Killed! Killed just to satisfy the bloodlust of these abominable things! I'm going to find out all about them and then take the greatest pleasure in killing them.'

Adams said: 'I'd like to work with you. Two heads are better than one anyhow and if there's anything biological it's in my field. But first come and have some tea with me.'

'Hell, no! I'm going to get busy.'

'With no refreshment inside you after all you've been through? Don't be an idiot! Fifteen minutes in the canteen will make all the difference.'

Norcross hesitated, surveyed the tin of messy substance lying in the sunlight pouring through the window; then he gave a nod.

'Okay. Maybe you're right at that.'

The two men stayed longer over their tea than they had intended. It was chiefly Norcross's fault. He had so much to say, so much to relate and theorise upon. He knew he had stumbled onto something both mysterious and dangerous and it was obsessing him. He only stopped talking when the canteen radio came to life with the news.

'Here is the first news. There are reports today of extraordinary happenings in various parts of the country, particularly in the area of Coxwold which will be remembered as headlining the news a few days ago with a report of mysterious tadpole objects. It appears that these objects have been making their presence felt again. A six year old girl, a picnic party, several haymakers, a commercial traveller, and two girl cyclists have now fallen victims to these mysterious slayers. Scotland Yard have now taken the matter in hand and we understand that an official of the Ministry of Agriculture is also investigating...'

'Worse than I thought,' Norcross said, as Adams gave him a grim look. 'Those things are striking far and wide.'

'Let's get back to the lab,' Adams said, rising.

Within a few minutes they had returned to their laboratory. Norcross did not know why, but the moment he crossed the threshold he scented danger. He came to a stop, Adams immediately behind him, gazing around.

On the face of it everything appeared normal enough—for a moment. Then Norcross reached behind him and gripped Adams' arm tightly. The chemist gave a gulp and stared transfixed. There was a Slitherer, half coiled round the top of an acid carboy. Its deadly eyes were fixed on the two men.

Adams moved backwards immediately, and attracted by the action the Slitherer sprang. It slipped round the top of the carboy like a glittering silver ribbon in the sunlight;

then with incredible velocity it flew straight for Norcross. With only a fraction of time to spare he leapt back into the passage and slammed the door shut. The Slitherer hit it on the other side and a crack appeared down one of the top panels. Then there was silence for a moment.

'What happens now?' Adams panted, sweating.

'Give it a chance to calm down,' Norcross said. 'Then—'

He broke off at the sound of splintering glass. Gradually the sounds died away and nothing more seemed to happen.

'I think it's escaped,' Norcross said.

He opened the door carefully and looked into the laboratory. All was quiet. One of the windows over the main bench was shattered and there was no sign of a Slitherer anywhere.

'Okay,' Norcross murmured. 'It's gone through the window.'

He and Adams moved across the laboratory together; then Adams scratched his head.

'Maybe I'm dumb, but where did it come from in the first place?'

'The tin,' Norcross indicated it in the sunshine where they had left it.

'But there was only jelly, or something, inside that when we went to tea.'

'I know. The thing must have been in the midst of the stuff in a state of formation, and while we had tea it evolved.'

'That quickly? Come off it, man!'

'These things,' Norcross said deliberately, 'evolve at a fantastic rate, as I've good reason to know. Right now there may be others in the process of evolution—and come to that there are perhaps hundreds more in the Coxwold cornfield. I didn't get all the jelly by any means: only a scraping.'

'That's a happy thought. Well, what's next?'

Norcross moved to the sample tin, lifted it out of the sunlight, and put it on the central bench. In its depths, amidst the jelly and syrup, were dozens of microscopic specks rather like cigarette ash, and Adams could have sworn the specks were pulsating.

'Future Slitherers—dozens of 'em,' Norcross said grimly. 'I'd destroy the lot here and now if it weren't essential to study 'em.'

Adams pondered. 'What *are* they? I never saw anything like them before.'

'Nor anybody else, I fancy. I'd say they're not a product of this world at all, only I can't see how they came from another planet... There seems to be some connection between plant fertilizer and meat paste sandwiches, though where it fits in I don't know yet.'

Gradually Adams was getting a firmer grip of the situation. 'How long before these things evolve? You say evolution is rapid.'

'Very. But...' Norcross thought for a moment. 'It occurs to me that these things seem to evolve rapidly when there is sunlight. For instance, when the tin was in my car and shut off from the sun nothing happened. But when we left the tin in the sun whilst we had tea a Slitherer, evidently the most advanced of the lot, evolved! We might try putting the tin in the fridge and reducing it to freezing point.'

'Good idea.'

Norcross followed up his idea then lighted a cigarette and sat down to think. So far he seemed to have been dodging for safety and witnessing horror. Now the time

had come for cold, analytical thinking.

'About these things I know practically nothing,' he said, as Adams waited for observations. 'Leaving the Slitherers themselves for the moment let's concentrate on the stuff that seems to give them birth. First there is fertilizer used in the crop—'

'Normal enough. Can't infer anything from that.'

'Not be too sure! The fertilizer contains an unknown ingredient which in my analysis I couldn't fit into anything I know. The manufacturers didn't know what the ingredient was, either. It has been responsible, I think, for a fantastic crop of wheat.'

'All right, excluding the mystery of the business we have an unknown ingredient in the fertilizer. What else?'

'Meat paste,' Norcross said. 'And crazy though it sounds I think the answer lies there. My idea is to analyse it down to rock bottom and see what we get.'

'Why do that? Contact the manufacturers and ask for the formula.'

Norcross sighed. 'There are hundreds of manufacturers of meat paste, and we don't know which sort this was. It appears that a girl harvester, Rita Haslam by name, originally had the meat paste. Just a chance she might remember. Hmm, that would take time. I'll do my own analysis.'

On this Norcross was determined. He waited until the jelly in the tin was at a temperature just above freezing—which seemed to retard but not kill the mysterious life—and then he took the tin from the fridge. Adams watched him scrape some of the jelly onto a microscope slide and then begin operations. Altogether it took an hour and the job was done out of line with direct sunlight. Norcross pondered the scratch pad on which he had written his analysis. Adams in the meantime blocked the broken window with a big piece of hardboard.

'Can't separate one from the other,' Norcross said finally. 'Meat paste from fertilizer, I mean. That leaves us with a good deal of the original fertilizer formula—including the mysterious brown substance which we'll call "X"—and as far as the meat paste goes it is a standard formula with a fifteen per cent inclusion of dextrone.'

'Dextrone? I seem to have heard of that stuff somewhere.'

'Very probably. It's one of the new vitamin discoveries included in many canned foods these days. Builds stamina, strong bones, horse teeth, and all the rest of it. At least that's what the public thinks it does...' Norcross beat gently with his pencil. 'Which brings us to the interesting speculation of what happens when dextrone is mixed with this unknown brown element. We might do worse than try it.'

The exacting process of segregating the two elements and then mating them began. When it was done Norcross and Adams watched the result—which proved to be merely a sticky brown mess that didn't mean a thing.

'Guess again,' Norcross sighed.

'Wait a minute!' Adams pulled the hardboard from the roughly repaired window. 'Try unshielded sunlight—with-out glass in the way or anything. Might be the answer.'

Though he hadn't much faith in the prospect Norcross nevertheless followed the suggestion and stood looking at the minute quantity of stuff attentively. Then he frowned. Part of the stuff was very slowly streaking with grey. In a matter of seconds, it had broken up into specks—once again exactly like cigarette ash.

'Life cells of some sort,' Adams said, glancing. 'Very low form of life too—at least to begin with.'

With the passage of the moments the jelly substance, becoming hotter, turned grey all over, and as before the grey split up into individual units. In the end there were hundreds of minute cells, living and pulsating, and growing larger.

'Slitherers in the making,' Norcross said grimly. 'Not if I know it!'

He whipped the substance out of the sunlight and threw it in the waste bin. A half bottle of acid followed, and that was that. A filthy stench rose on the air, bubbles and smoke belched out of the waste bin, but in the finish there was nothing left. The stuff had vanished.

'At least we know how to kill it,' Adams said, lighting a cigarette uncertainly.

'Yes... in the early stages, anyhow. It's a tougher job when a Slitherer is full grown. Now, let's see where we are,' Norcross looked at his notes and reflected. 'According to our present knowledge there is a mysterious element in the plant fertilizer, which caused crops to become gargantuan—but it only happened in the case of wheat and nothing else. Right! Next, a girl drops sandwiches of meat paste, and the fertilizer and meat paste mixed themselves together in hot sunlight and produced a gooey mess, from which come the Slitherers. They're born in the stuff and soon evolve to full size. When they are full grown they are merciless killers, and they produce imbecility and death.' Norcross dragged at his cigarette. 'Yes, that's it. And it's something too big for us to tinker with by ourselves...'

'Is it?' Adams asked pointedly.

'I'm getting out of my depth,' Norcross confessed. 'Any way, what are these damned Slitherers getting at?'

'Looks to me as though they're just motivated by the blind lust to kill.'

'On the face of it, yes, but usually the victims survive for quite a time after being attacked—adult victims anyway—and the result produced is one of imbecility. As though the mind and reason have been completely blasted.'

'Shook,' Adams said, but Norcross shook his head.

'I don't think so. In the case of a child like Sheila Danbury, yes, but adults are too tough to succumb that easily. I'm thinking of the way these infernal things fly straight to the forehead. It happened in my own case, but my hand got in the way just in time. Forehead—imbecility—death.'

Norcross followed a line of thought. It led nowhere.

'How do we start finding out about this unknown ingredient in the fertilizer?' Adams asked. 'Contact the manufacturers again?'

'Wouldn't do any good. They're no wiser than we are. Maybe there's another way. Have a talk with their chemists and then break down the fertilizer before it leaves the factory and see what it contains. They might be able to name the stuff. Better make it the first move tomorrow.'

'And tonight?'

'Tonight,' Norcross said, 'I'm going home to study all the books I've got concerning chemicals, fertilizers, and what have you, then maybe tomorrow I'll be in a better position to tackle the business. As for this tin of stuff, we'll freeze it overnight. That ought to make it safe enough.'

He put the tin in the refrigerator and closed the door. Adams asked a question.

'Did it ever occur to you that cellular life of this type will propagate itself by fission? Division?'

'No, I hadn't thought of it,' Norcross admitted. 'Divi-

sion, eh?'

'Uh-huh. The most lowly method of propagation that there is, but if that is the principle in the small embryo—and judging from that tin of jelly it is—then the same principle will apply when the things reach maturity.'

Norcross didn't answer. He was just beginning to realise the implications. Propagation by fission meant infinite numbers. From the original seven he knew of fourteen could appear, and from fourteen, twenty eight. Increasing all the time...

The cornfield of Coxwold was not dead. Long after Norcross had departed, darting grey shapes took to the air from the syrupy mess left in the sunshine. The things headed northward in the main—no wings, no visible means of propulsion. Everything about them was foreign to this world.

From Scotland to southern England there were calls for help. The countryside was gradually becoming infested with the killers. Nobody was safe, and children least of all. Slitherers even came through windows and down chimneys in search of prey, and always left behind the mindless and the dying.

Norcross learned of all these things when finally he went home.

'I've seen what's been going on on the telly,' his wife Lucy told him. 'I never saw anything so ghastly in all my life! Like something you read about, but could never happen.'

'It's happening all right,' Norcross said grimly, and at that his wife went close to him. She sat on the pouffe beside him and gripped his wrist.

'I think you know more than you're telling, Hart. What are they? What are they doing here?'

'I can't answer either question, Lucy. I'm at my wits' end to know what to do.'

'Do you think the things might be from another world?'

'They could be, but I'm sure they don't represent the thinking species of another planet. They're of low order. About the same as if we transported some Earth tarantula to Mars. They wouldn't represent our civilisation; only a low form of life.'

Lucy sighed. 'I don't know what things are coming to. What with rocket propulsion, nuclear bombs, space satellites, flying saucers, and heaven knows what, there's no—'

Norcross looked up sharply. 'Flying saucers!'

'Yes,' Lucy confirmed, surprised. 'What about them?'

'I just wonder...'

Norcross got to his feet and went over to a drawer. From it, clipped into a manilla folder, he took a list of press cuttings on unusual scientific happenings. Before long he came to the last known visit of flying saucers in March. Now it was July. Finally he picked up the telephone and dialled Adams, his fellow laboratory worker.

'Hallo there,' came Adams' voice.

'Norcross here,' Norcross said. 'Look, you can think me crazy if you like, but what about flying saucers? They were here in strength in March last.'

'Check. What about it?'

'According to the report I have here several of the saucers trailed a smoke screen—in every country of the world. At least we thought it was a smoke screen, but supposing it wasn't? What if the mist were something else?'

'All right. What was it, then?'

'Suppose it was the unknown element we've discovered

in the fertilizer? Not smoke at all, but a fine powder of some sort?

Silence. Adams was obviously thinking.

'It ties up,' Norcross continued. 'The wheat wasn't gigantic in just one field: it was all over the world. The saucers were *also* all over the world. There seems to be only one conclusion to be drawn from it all—that the saucers disseminated some kind of stuff, a brownish powder, so fine that it looked like smoke as it came down, and which was more or less invisible when it fell on soil. It has some mystic property which causes gigantic plant growth. It got mixed up with ordinary fertilizer because nobody knew what it was, and there was no reason to suspect anything odd. That is why the fertilizer I got from Coxwold is contaminated with this unknown element of which the manufacturers know nothing.'

'Um—sounds possible,' Adams agreed. 'But whoever heard of a plant food, if that's what it is, being so selective? What caused it to solely stimulate wheat growth and leave everything else alone?'

Norcross smiled faintly. 'As yet, old man, agricultural science is in its infancy. There are thousands of things to be discovered. A race which has perfected flying saucers might conceivably have also perfected marvellous plant foods which are extremely selective in that they react only to certain kinds of plants—in this case, wheat.'

'There's still a hell of a question mark—*Why?* Where's the sense of stimulating our wheatfields and what has it got to do with the Slitherers?'

'I don't know yet, but if we have the answer to part of the puzzle it's a safe bet that we'll get the rest of it. Somehow, the brown ingredient in the fertilizer and the Slitherers are definitely connected. There's another point. The birthplace of the Slitherers is in Coxwold, where the meat sandwiches fell. In no other part of the world, even though the brown mystery powder has presumably fallen there, is there any mention of Slitherers—so it seems an inescapable possibility that the meat paste has something to do with it.'

'Seems like it. All right, what are we going to do?'

'I had thought about visiting the fertilizer manufacturers tomorrow but in face of this new theory I don't think it would do much good. I'll visit the meat paste manufacturers instead and also find out whose brand of meat paste it was. I'll have to track down that girl Rita Haslam through the newspapers. Okay, I'll see you at the lab. some time tomorrow.'

The next day Norcross carried out his plans. He tracked down Rita Haslam, and from her—amidst details of her actual experiences in the cornfield—he got the brand of meat paste that had been used in the sandwiches; then from this he went to the manufacturers themselves and after some difficulty with the managing director obtained the formula of the meat paste. This done, he put in a belated appearance at the laboratory.

'Chief wants you,' were Adams' first words.

'Oh, hell!' Norcross turned and went out again. In a moment or two he had entered the office of the laboratory director.

'So there you are, Norcross! I suppose you've heard the latest news about these things called the Slitherers?'

'Last I heard of them they were attacking people right, left and centre.'

'Up to an hour ago they were still breeding down in Coxwold. That's why I sent for you. You're supposed to be

looking into the Coxwold business. How far have you got?' 'Did you say "up to an hour ago" the Slitherers were still breeding? What's happened since then?'

'By now,' the laboratory director said complacently, 'all the breeding ground will have been destroyed. I got permission to send an army detachment down to Coxwold. Since the place has been evacuated anyway it would have been all right to destroy the cornfield with small bombs—and incidentally the Slitherers' breeding ground. I'm expecting a call at any moment announcing our success. The point is, Norcross: what are *you* supposed to have been doing?'

Briefly, Norcross gave the details of his activities to date. The director listened in silence.

'You're pursuing an unusual course, Norcross. However, the assignment was put in your hands so work it out in your own way—but don't be too long about it. The public is waiting to know something. The Government has got its own scientists to work as well, studying the business. If we can, we want to score all the successes, don't we, Norcross?'

'I don't think it signifies so long as we stamp the trouble out, sir.'

'In that case, the army will take the credit. With the breeding ground destroyed, the rest is easy.'

'Easy?' Norcross raised an eyebrow. 'I don't think so, sir. The Slitherers which have already been born are our real trouble. Since they increase their numbers by dividing themselves there is no limit to their propagation. Destroying the Coxwold field is merely a classic example of shutting the stable door after the horse has gone.'

The director looked annoyed, then he picked up the telephone as it shrilled.

'Walsingham here.' He listened, then utter amazement came over his face. 'It couldn't happen, man! It *couldn't*!'

More fast talking through the receiver, the gist of which Norcross could not catch.

'All right,' Walsingham said at last, dazed. 'Yes—do as you like. Use tanks if you have to, or contact the Air Ministry and have the area bombed. Yes, of course you have to have Government sanction.'

Walsingham rang off and looked at Norcross across the desk.

'Astounding thing!' he declared. 'That detachment of militia which went to Coxwold has been wiped out. Every man! Before they could even get into position they were attacked by the Slitherers and, after brief, mindless wandering, collapsed and died. There's absolute panic down there.'

Norcross rubbed his chin. 'That sounds as though the Slitherers must have returned in force to Coxwold for some reason. Did I understand you to say the Air Force was going to be used next?'

'Only way, isn't it?'

'I suppose so,' Norcross agreed. 'Anyway, I've got my own angle on all this. I'd better get back to the lab, and see what more I can find out.'

'Yes, do that—and let me know how you get on.'

Norcross wasted no time in returning to his own department. He drew Adams to one side from the general laboratory staff and quickly briefed him on what was happening to date.

'So now it's a matter of what?' Adams asked.

'We've got to work out this meat paste formula first and then see what its relationship is to the mystery ingredient in the fertilizer. Let's see now. There's still some of that

unknown ingredient locked away in the fridge from the first experiment. We can work on that... Come to think of it, we'd better have a jar of Selby's meat paste too. That's the particular brand we need. Hop out and get one, will you?"

Norcross handed over the money and then pulled from his pocket the formula he had been given at the Selby Meat Manufacturers. He read it over as he changed into an overall.

"Dextrone," he repeated finally, after summing up the other ingredients and finding them normal enough. "What in blazes is dextrone?"

He frowned for a moment and then crossed to the monthly sheet of the latest substances legally permitted use by the Government. Casting back to the April sheet he found dextrone listed as a substance altogether suitable for human consumption, and apparently one of the gelatin order. Briefly, the meat paste had had dextrone added as a binding medium, in place of the usual gelatin.

Norcross reflected. By no possible process could the other ingredients of the meat paste cause trouble, but dextrone was another matter. A newly discovered substance, produced originally from animal matter, as are all the gelatin compounds.

Adams came in with the pot of meat paste. Norcross took it, unscrewed the lid, and sniffed at the contents.

"We might make sandwiches, go on a picnic, and forget the whole thing," Adams said, then at Norcross's stony look he became quiet.

"This isn't funny, old man; it's damned serious," Norcross said, fishing some of the meat paste out of the jar with a spatula. "You say you've heard of dextrone?"

"Only vaguely. Had something to do with it last week. It's an extract of gelatin, used both in foods and explosives."

"Bright boy. Anyway, this meat paste is bound with it instead of the usual gelatin. Our job is to isolate it."

Which, to an analytical chemist, was not a serious problem. In half an hour isolation from the meat paste proper was complete, and the two men stood looking at the pale yellow jelly substance.

"A product of bones, cartilage, and other substances," Norcross said slowly. "Summed up, the product of an animal. Now let's see what the affinity is for the mysterious something in the fertilizer."

He opened the refrigerator and looked first at the tin he had placed there the previous night. It looked just the same, its contents frosted over. Then he removed the unknown grey-brown dust contained in a small jar, which he had placed there at the end of his former unsuccessful analysis. Pondering, he came back to the bench.

"Mix these two together and things ought to happen as before," he said, ladling some of the brown dung onto the bench. "Let's see."

Into the dung he mixed some of the dextrone, but nothing happened. Just a sticky brown mess like dirty paste. "Something's missing," Norcross said, disappointed; then Adams glanced about him and snapped his fingers.

"Sunlight, maybe! It seems to be a big factor."

Norcross nodded and moved the whole issue to line with the sunlight streaming through the nearest window. Without doubt things were hot enough, but still nothing happened.

"Damned queer," Norcross muttered. "Surely it wasn't some odd coincidence that happened just once and will

never happen again for thousands of years?" For a moment or two he was mystified; then he looked up sharply. "I've got it! Most of the sun's important radiations are blocked by ordinary window glass—ultra-violet for one, and there may be others. We did the last job in unshielded sunlight."

Even as he was speaking he was again moving the experiment. This time to the window blocked by cardboard. He wrenched the cardboard away and then stood watching. The stuff showed signs of becoming more jellyfied than before, proving it was not warmth alone which was affecting it. Then, abruptly, streaks of grey like cigarette ash. Norcross gave a yelp and swept the lot into the waste bin. As before, he flooded the stuff with acid.

"Well, that's that!" he said, rubbing an eyebrow. "It would seem that the dextrone and the unknown brown substance have an affinity for each other, an affinity which is complete when unmasked sunshine takes over. It isn't the heat that causes things to happen; it's something in the radiations of the sun, and ordinary window glass blocks those radiations... So far so good. What we have got to do is analyse this brown substance again, though God knows I've tried every trick."

Just the same Norcross went to work again, this time extending his activity so as to include the electron-microscope. With this in operation he and Adams stood looking at the brown substance, now immensely magnified.

"In some ways," Adams said, "it looks like rope; in others like a chain of variously-shaped objects. Say a mineral string. Even analysed down to the limit like this the brown stuff doesn't tell us anything."

"Dextrone might," Norcross mused, and since the electron-microscope was in the range of the sunlight from the broken window he added a trace of dextrone to the brown substance and watched what happened.

After a few moments the varishaped pieces in the mass of brown substance twitched as the dextrone flowed viscidly into their midst. Slowly the brown chain broke up, each unit assuming a queer life of its own and gradually turning grey.

"We've got it!" Adams whispered. "This is it!"

Norcross did not answer. He was too busy studying the phenomenon before his eyes, and under the intense power of the microscope it was possible to see the grey shapes changing from mere specks of living matter into decided outline—the embryonic formation of a Slitherer.

Before things got out of hand Norcross switched off, removed the stuff from the microscope area, and once again destroyed it with acid.

"You're the biologist," Norcross said, looking at Adams. "What ideas have you got?"

"Incredible ones, I'm afraid. It looks to me as though the brown stuff is actually living matter, only it doesn't behave that way until dextrone goes to work on it."

"Which means dextrone is, in some way, a catalyst."

They were silent for a moment, aware of deep waters.

The brown stuff is not affected by "naked" sunlight alone," Norcross resumed thoughtfully. "It has lain in the fields for long enough under the fierce summer sun without doing anything more than cause a colossal wheat crop all over the world. Yet the moment it gets accidentally mixed up with dextrone things start to happen and it changes from fertilizer—which we will assume is its basic nature—into a cradle of horror. Why?"

"That we don't know," Adams shrugged. "Nobody can

ever say what a catalyst will do. For that matter, nobody knows what a catalyst is. It just happens to be something which produces a certain effect on something else, as in this case.'

'From which it is logical to infer that no menace was intended—that whoever sent the brown fertilizer in the first place had no intention of creating Slitherers which would endanger our security.'

'That's the way it looks,' Adams admitted. 'From which I gather you are still clinging to your original idea of flying saucers being responsible for the brown fertilizer?'

Norcross shrugged. 'Have you any other ideas?'

'Afraid I haven't,' Adams frowned. 'But assuming you're right why should the people of say, Mars or Venus wish to improve our wheat?'

'No idea. A beautiful harvest seems to have turned into a tragedy.'

'I hope,' Adams said bitterly, 'that the Martians or Venusians are satisfied with their handiwork!'

After a moment of thought Norcross said, 'Chemically, with regard to this brown fertilizing element, we are forced to one conclusion. It contains life-force of an obscure kind, and therefore in the normal way is capable of transmitting that life-force to plants, just as our own plant foods do in a rudimentary sort of way. The trouble comes when the catalyst breaks the life-force up into cells which in turn evolve rapidly into living creatures... Y'know, I think Mars is back of this.'

'Why Mars? Couldn't it equally be Venus?'

'I don't think so. Mars is a cold planet, as we know. This plant food, transferred from Mars, has acted with tremendous force on wheat under the hot Earth sun, probably far in excess of anything accomplished on Mars.'

'But as far as wheat fields are concerned there aren't any on Mars' surface, but there might be on Venus, if we could see the surface.'

'The wheat fields of Mars might be below the surface,' Norcross mused. 'In which case the sun of Mars would not reach them. I'm trying to fathom why the stuff behaves with such stimulus, and the only answer I can think of is the sun. The Slitherers are a different matter, even though the sun is again the major factor. But it is not the warmth in that case; it's something in the radiations which completes the circuit of life.'

'We can only form conclusions, and the rest is a mystery,' Adams said. 'We've got to be rid of the Slitherers. What are we going to do about it?'

'The Government is handling that. We've done all we can.'

'Officially, maybe, but for our own satisfaction we ought to find out more. What are the Slitherers aiming at, for instance? Is it just plain killing for killing's sake?'

'Apparently it is. And yet—' Norcross became silent, stroking his long nose; then he whispered, 'Oh, my God!'

Adams looked at him sharply. 'What?'

'I was just thinking. In every case the Slitherers have struck at the head—usually the forehead—and they leave behind imbeciles who've died shortly afterwards. The forehead is the most likely place to attack if the brain is the objective. In the majority of cases the hair of the individual would prevent the things getting a hold on other parts of the head.'

'Well?'

'Can it be that these things are capable of drawing intelligence from a person? That they leave imbeciles behind

afterwards seems to suggest that's what they do. Leeches, man! They have the same qualities, but where leeches draw blood they perhaps draw intellect, and if they do that they must be becoming more intelligent with every person they attack!'

'It's a horrible thought,' Adams said, staring before him.

'They have revealed a certain amount of intelligence already,' Norcross went on. 'Take the case of the army detachment which tried to eliminate them. The Slitherers congregated in the spot where they were originally born and—anticipated them! So accurately indeed that they slew the enemy first.'

'It hangs together,' Adams admitted, biting his lip. 'But is it possible to draw intelligence from anybody? Isn't it too vague a quality to absorb by material means?'

'No reason why it should be. Brain emanations—or thoughts—are measurable on instruments. These emanations could be absorbed by an organism capable of receiving them. If the Slitherers have some kind of physical composition able to retain the brain emanations after they have absorbed them they will make use of the knowledge which they have literally sucked from their victims. For all we know their structure may be entirely a mass of neurones and fibres similar to that of a brain itself.'

'And yet lowly enough to divide themselves by fission?' Adams questioned. 'The two things don't tie up.'

'Then maybe division in their case is not of quite such a lowly order as we think. It may be their natural reaction. Remember we're dealing with something we've never experienced before.'

'If these things are absorbing intelligence, the danger is increased a thousand-fold,' Adams muttered. 'The more intelligent they become the more difficult they'll be to destroy.'

After a while Norcross said, 'I think, in spite of the risk we're taking, that we'll create a Slitherer from that jelly in the fridge and then kill it. After that we'll dissect.'

'Neither of us is up to much in that art.'

'We've enough common knowledge to be able to recognise the interior structure of a Slitherer when we've cut it open. Right! We'll do it.'

By now the two men had lost all track of time, so absorbed were they in their work. Actually it was near lunchtime, a fact that concerned them not in the least, until a thought suddenly struck Norcross as he glanced at the clock.

'Let's hold it over while the rest of them go for lunch,' he murmured, nodding to the distant staff. 'If there should be any danger they won't be involved in it.'

Adams nodded rather uneasily, and for the rest of time until lunch he and Norcross discussed again the various aspects of the problem without arriving at any fresh conclusion. Only when the last of the laboratory staff had departed did Norcross bring the tin of 'Jelly' from the fridge and surveyed the frost coating upon it.

'Just a matter of leaving the sun to deal with it,' he said, setting the tin in the direct sunlight. 'Then we'll be ready for whatever happens.'

'Oughtn't you to open the window and let direct sunshine on it?' Adams questioned.

'No need. That's only necessary to create the actual things in the first place, when we have the fusion of dextrone and fertilizer. Once that is done warmth does the rest... As it's doing now,' Norcross added, nodding to the grey streaks which had appeared in the gummy mess.

So, within an incredibly short space of time, several Slitherers took form, first in the 'tadpole' stage, then growing swiftly into eel-like formation. In this particular streak of weird living grey substance there were as many as six Slitherers, with other grey streaks commencing to form.

'Right!' Norcross exclaimed finally. 'This one's big enough.'

He singled out the largest and, using a pair of long-handled stainless steel tongs he lifted the almost full-grown object out of the jelly and placed it on the bench. It lay motionless, apparently orientating itself to the situation.

'Put the others in the fridge,' Norcross ordered, and Adams promptly obeyed, thankfully closing the refrigerator door. Then he turned back to Norcross who was in the act of filling a hypo syringe with a lethal fluid.

He said, 'This ought to kill it stone dead, yet at the same time not destroy its organs. Here goes!'

Not knowing any particular part of the reptilian anatomy to select he took a chance and drove the needle in at random. The Slitherer reared up instantly in violent reaction, the hypodermic projecting from its body like a miniature harpoon. Immediately Norcross sprang back and darted for the laboratory door with Adams close behind him. There, with the door ajar in case a sudden dash were needed, they watched what happened.

Not for long, however. The 'harpooned' Slitherer darted in various directions at lightning speed, apparently not at all sure what it was doing. Certainly the coordination which had been noticeable in previous creatures was not evident in this one... Then the poison must have taken effect for, in darting for a huge bottle on which to rest, its flight suddenly faltered and it dropped to the floor. For a second or two it lashed furiously and then gradually movement ceased and it became still.

'Okay,' Norcross murmured. 'I think we've done it.'

He and Adams moved forward to investigate. There was no doubt that the thing was well and truly dead, its murderous little eyes already glazing and its body beginning to stiffen. Unceremoniously, Norcross slapped it on the bench and withdrew the syringe, then he went over to the instrument-cupboard and came back with two sharp knives.

'Do your best,' he said to Adams. 'It won't be a perfect surgical job; we know that. We'll have to fillet it like a fish and then examine it.'

This did not present any great difficulty. The queer, rubbery flesh of the Slitherer gave way quickly enough under the keen blades, and considering they were not experts the two men made a fairly good effort. In the end they had two rough halves and stood looking at them interestedly.

'Main vertebrae anyhow,' Norcross said. 'After which it branches off into these myriads of hinged side bones, somewhat after the structure of an eel. I suppose this watery ichor is the equivalent of its blood. Now, its internal organs and nervous system...'

For this the ordinary microscope was brought into action and the whole business was mainly Adams' field as a biologist. In the end he looked at Norcross.

'Your guess was a mighty good one,' he said. 'Its body structure, apart from the main hinged bone framework, is a complicated mass of criss-crossing ganglia and nerves, together with filigrees of nervous tissue. The thing is a highly sensitive living receiver of impressions, and as such a perfect creature for picking up the weak impulses of brain frequencies.'

'So far, so good,' Norcross said, nodding. 'The thing could store brain impulses and then use them. We've discovered that much. Now to something else: what makes it have such strange powers of propulsion and such terrific speed?'

This was a more difficult problem to pinpoint but the answer seemed to lie in an organ close to the Slitherer's tail, an organ which had a small channel leading from it to a pair of lips on the outside of its body.

'I think the answer lies here,' Adams said, 'but what the answer is I don't know. We can hazard a guess, that's all... Plainly, a creature which can absorb brain frequencies must have a mainly electrical constitution, so why not an electrical method of propelling itself? Even creatures in our own animal and fish kingdoms have electrical tendencies. We can assume that this one, perhaps, utilises in some electrical way the lines of magnetic force which exist between all material objects. They *do* exist, and machines can prove it, but nobody has ever attempted to turn them to account. Perhaps the Slitherers do it naturally.'

Norcross said, 'Okay, we'll accept lines of magnetic force as the only answer we can think of. Not that it matters too much, though I'd like to know what makes them tick. What *does* stand out is that they're capable of being absorbers of intelligence to an amazing degree, and for that reason the danger they represent is appalling.'

Silence for a moment, and then Norcross stirred. 'Well, I'll make a report of our findings to date and let the chief have it. Maybe other biologists and scientists will check on our findings and have a few bright suggestions to offer. Far as I can see right now we've done all we can.'

A million miles away in space a colossal space ship moved with easy velocity. For nearly five years it had pursued its journey from the vast reaches near Alpha Centauri; now it was in orbit around the Earth. For nearly six months it had pursued its present course, polarising screens effectively rendering it invisible to Earthly telescopes.

Within its monstrous, radiation-proofed depths was almost an entire city, complete with every need. Those beings who manned the vessel knew exactly what was happening on Earth.

They were big and grave-faced, these last men and women of Alpha Centauri. They represented the highest intelligence of their race—a race whittled down now to six hundred, the remnants of a once mighty people.

Behind them, they had left a world suddenly overtaken by a poisonous gas outflow from Alpha Centauri, their sun. There had barely been time for them to get away. Intelligently, persistently, they were reaching out for a new world to inhabit—but forbearance and wisdom precluded the possibility that they should at any time secure their ends by violence.

'It would seem,' one of them remarked presently, 'that our experiment to discover if our fertilizer will work in alien conditions has taken on a malignant form. How, I would ask, could FG9—which is of course the perfect plant food—produce dangerous creatures like these?'

'That, surely, is not such a big question my friend,' the leader shrugged. 'Our endeavour was to see if our FG9 fertilizer could operate on alien crops, as it does on ours. If it had worked, then doubtless we could have come to some arrangement with the alien authorities for us to tenant the unused parts of their planet—amply sufficient for our small numbers—and in return for the concession

hand them many of our scientific secrets. That was our main idea, the reason for our recent investigation of this planet's surface by our scout machines. Our inward journey through this system has shown that no other world would suit us as well as this one's underdeveloped areas, and we *had* to know how our crops would react under alien conditions, hence the FG9 spraying...

The leader shook his head moodily. 'We know what has happened. The FG9 operated perfectly on their staple crop, as it does on our own, but after that came those deadly creatures. They were produced accidentally by some alien catalyst, and now they are causing these people untold trouble! Since FG9 is a fertilizer composed of active minute life, the evolution of the creatures under a catalyst may not be deemed unusual, where two different planets are concerned.'

There was silence for a moment, then the leader spread his hands.

'And now? We can offer no help because the creatures are as much a mystery to us as to the aliens. They'll deal with them as best they can—but for us all prospects of the planet as a possible habitat must be forgotten. After unintentionally creating this kind of trouble we would hardly be welcome. We can only hope that somehow these people will survive the blow we have dealt them...'

The leader fell silent, looking into the scanner at the weird spawning life of the Slitherers. Then he closed the switch which blanked the screen. That unknown quantity was repellant even to look upon!

And the Slitherers flourished, gaining in numbers and reasoning power with every passing day. But there was one point of significance which Norcross noted—and he mentioned it to Adams.

'It looks to me,' Norcross said, 'as though these Slitherers "home" every night in one particular place, much the same as birds go to roost, and unless I'm dead wrong they've chosen Coxwold. You see the possibilities? If we can get them all bottled up in one spot—all those in Britain anyway—we can work out something to destroy them...'

With this new theory in mind, Norcross and Adams both went to work. They investigated Coxwold that same night and found the original cornfield black with the brutes, packed so tight that they were even lying on top of each other—which in itself was peculiar. This information gathered, the two men silently withdrew and by connivance with the Air Ministry got their pilots to investigate far and wide. The answer was gathered in a week—every night, in every country, the Slitherers always returned to one particular spot to rest after the depredations of the day.

'We don't know *why* they do it, but it's most convenient that they do,' was Norcross's summing up, to a gathering of harrassed experts at the Ministry of Agriculture. 'I suggest that we launch a full-scale attack on them tomorrow night, with the assistance of the air force. Let them gather on their sleeping grounds then give them hell! Rain down bombs, fire, acids, and everything we've got. Exterminate them from the earth!'

The plan was duly carried out—but it met with disaster. At 2-00 a.m. the 'planes converged with their loads, each one over a different 'sleeping ground' in a different country, but before anything could be done the Slitherers came rising up from below with stupendous speed, apparently working to a plan... They smashed through observation windows, jammed the 'plane motors, snapped fuselage, tore

off undercarriages. Like living razors they sheared through wings, destroyed bodywork, and in less than fifteen minutes—despite the cost to themselves—they had so demoralised the raiders that they had to turn back, many of them fighting inside the cabins with the thinking, reptilian hordes.

Debate, complete and absolute.

Despite inglorious defeat at the hands of the Slitherers, Norcross still was not beaten. He still had the backing of the various Government Ministries for whatever schemes he wanted to try—and a few nights later he made another attempt to win success. This time, during the day, the Coxwold field was electrified and controlled from a distance. At night, when the Slitherers came home to roost, the throwing of a switch should electrocute them.

It *should* have done, but it didn't. The Slitherers had the power of reason, and a definite instinct for danger. In consequence they bit through the main power lead, and nothing happened. They were still unharmed, intelligent, and multiplying with startling speed, spending their days harrassing men and women in city, village, country lane, and motor road. Something had got to be done before their numbers became too vast to cope with.

Norcross nearly lived at the laboratory these days, and after the latest abortive effort with electrocution he sat for hours, after the staff had gone home, trying to think some sense into the problem. Towards midnight he had the glimmerings of an idea, and he transmitted it to Adams the following morning.

'Look,' he said, thinking as he spoke. 'These Slitherers pack themselves so tightly on the homing grounds that they lie one on top of another in *one particular area*, yet they leave vast portions of the fields untouched. What's your angle on it? Why should they do that? They can hardly rest properly lying on top of one another. Even animals, much less able to think than the Slitherers, don't do that! Any ideas?'

Adams pondered for a moment, then, 'Maybe there's something in the particular spot where they lie that they want to take advantage of—something that they absorb perhaps? They might be able to do it lying on top of one another.' Adams snapped his fingers suddenly. 'Electricity, perhaps? Electricity would transmit itself even through a body.'

'Yes—something like that,' Norcross agreed. 'That's what I've been thinking. If we can find out what it is the Slitherers *like* in their homing grounds, and can cut it off, they'll be in trouble and we'll start winning for a change! I think we might do worse than get Sid Travers on the job. He's good on anything electrical.'

So Sid Travers of the electrical division was called in. The facts were explained to him and then, equipped with instruments, he accompanied Norcross and Adams to the Coxwold field to make an investigation. Norcross was pretty certain there would be no difficulty about this since by day the Slitherers were elsewhere, bent on their usual depredations.

Once the Coxwold site was reached under the blazing summer sun it did not take the three of them long to unload the instruments; then they surveyed the Slitherers' field.

'Well, this is it,' Norcross said, 'and you can see how we wired it up for electrocution. And you know what happened! Anyway, see if you can discover anything peculiar about this field.'

Travers nodded and sorted out his instruments. At first he got no definite results; then he set up an object rather like a sextant, dominated by a dial resembling a voltmeter. Norcross and Adams looked at it curiously. At the moment its needle registered zero.

'If there's anything peculiar about this ground this detector will find it,' Travers said. 'We use it sometimes to register radiation of solar frequencies from the earth. It's on the principle of a Geiger counter, only it doesn't click. Now, let's see.'

He switched on and immediately the needle on the dial jumped to 250. Carefully he turned the nozzle of the detector itself, thereby gradually encompassing the entire field, and the same reading was maintained throughout. Though it was all Greek to Norcross and Adams they watched interestedly just the same.

'Any luck?' Norcross asked presently.

Travers did not answer: he had not yet finished. He fitted a thin lead shield into place which completely shadowed the main detector chamber from the grilling overhead sun—then he went to work again. The instrument needle still registered a steady 250 no matter what part of the 'homing area' the instrument was carried to.

'Well?' Norcross asked at last, as Travers meditated.

'Notice this scale?' Travers indicated it. 'As you can see, it covers the entire field of solar radiation—ultra violet, infra red, the lot. Ultra violet, the highest of all, registers 198, yet here we have a needle swing to 250 which carries us far beyond the ultra-violet field into X-rays, gamma rays, cosmic waves, and even beyond that. Radiation even shorter than cosmic, which is supposed to be the limit.'

'You mean the radiation is given off by the sun?' Norcross asked, squinting at it under a shading hand.

'Yes. We've known of it for long enough, and it seems it might be remotely connected with life-chemistry. Anyway, with the detector masking the sun—by this shield which is proof against any radiation—we still get a reading of 250 from the ground round here, which proves the radiation is absorbed by the ground and then reflected again with all its original strength. Radiation 250, as we'll call it for convenience, is being reflected with hundred per cent efficiency. Let's see what the rest of the ground here is like, and then I might be able to form a conclusion.'

To complete his investigation did not take him long, and Norcross and Adams looked at one another as they saw the needle on the instrument sink to zero immediately the Slitherers' field was left behind.

'Very, very interesting,' Travers said thoughtfully. 'I think we've got something, Norcross.'

'Well, what?' Norcross demanded.

'This field is loaded from end to end with some kind of material which reflects 250 with full efficiency. Towards the edges of the field the effect fades off. What it is that reflects 250 I don't pretend to know. That it happens to be limited to the Slitherers' field is purely coincidental. The inference is that the Slitherers come to this field to absorb 250, and when they lie on top of each other the radiation is transmitted from body to body in the fashion of electricity.'

'There must be other areas like this,' Norcross said. 'This field can't alone accommodate the numbers of Slitherers now in existence.'

'There can be other areas, just as there are certain areas of earth loaded with radio-activity, only detectable by Geiger counters. There's nothing unusual about the situation. The Slitherers have proved to us that certain spots on

earth are sensitive to absorbing and transmitting solar radiation 250. In itself it is harmless enough, to human beings, anyway. But to the Slitherers it is life blood, the recharging energy by which they keep themselves alive.'

'So far, so good,' Norcross reflected. 'But it doesn't entirely answer the problem. 250 is given off by the sun, you say. In that case the Slitherers wouldn't be any worse off if we destroyed this field, or somehow prevented it giving off 250. They would absorb it from the sun, and even cloudy weather wouldn't stop them since it comes through the clouds.'

Travers said, 'Assuming we could neutralise this field, we would cut down the stimulus to the Slitherers by fifty per cent. One thing seems obvious: they must be stimulated by day and night, hence their return to a place where they can get 250 when the sun goes down.'

'At times,' Adams said, 'they have attacked at night.'

'Perhaps when they have felt more revitalised than usual,' Norcross answered him. 'It isn't their regular habit to strike at night... And there's another thing. Why should sundown worry them? Won't the radiations pass through the earth?'

'Possibly,' Travers mused, 'but I imagine the efficiency will be weakened by lead layers, nickel iron, and dozens of other things... By and large, I think that if we can cut the stimulus down to half the Slitherers might run into trouble.'

'That test Slitherer of ours evidently keeps going by whatever radiation it gets from the sun in daylight hours,' Norcross said. 'The laboratory building and windows won't block it. Right! We've learned what keeps the damned things alive. There are two things now to do—Find out by aerial survey how many "recharging" fields there are, and also see from our test Slitherer how much it is reduced in efficiency if 250 is cut off from it entirely. From that we can calculate what a fifty per cent cut would mean.'

'Fair enough,' Travers agreed, and commenced to dismantle his instruments...

Back in the city the Slitherers were at work. The air was thick with the flying hordes. They squirmed on buildings, monuments, trees, pylons, and window ledges. They flogged buses, harried and destroyed human life, smashed shop windows, and wrecked all semblance of order in transport. Disorder was complete.

Somehow, Norcross and his two colleagues got back to the Agricultural Ministry laboratories, and then set about experimenting on their test Slitherer, one of the six specimens which had been in the refrigerator. The Slitherer was placed in a glass case, on three sides of which—those facing the sunlight pouring through the window—were heavy lead screens borrowed from the physical laboratory. According to Travers they were thick enough to block the 250 radiation. The fourth side, away from the sun, was left open for inspection purposes. Since the radiation travelled in straight lines, similar to light, there was no danger in leaving this remaining side open.

Fifteen minutes passed, with no change in the Slitherer. Then Travers asked a question.

'This thing hasn't been fed, I suppose?'

Norcross shook his head. 'We tried every darned thing—liquids and solids, and it refused the lot. Which seems to confirm that its food is electrical.'

'Mmmm. Looks that way. Wish we could get a reaction.'

But none came during the afternoon and, disappointed,

the three retired to the canteen for tea and sandwiches. During the process of eating them they got wind for the first time of the magnitude of the trouble striking London. Under the headlines of LONDON BELEAGURED! they read the full story of tragedy and destruction.

'Which shows what we're up against,' Norcross muttered. 'Let's get back to the lab and see if anything's happened.'

Apparently something had. The grey reptile was motionless in the base of its case.

'Have we done it?' Adams whispered.

Apparently they had. The thing was as hard as a board, and its venomous little eyes were glazed over.

'Well, Travers, you were right,' Norcross said, with a thankful sigh. 'Cutting off 250 brings death in about two hours.'

'Which calls for a little calculation,' Travers said. 'This thing only had 250 to rely on during the daylight hours, and none at all at night; which means it must have been able to tide over the night hours with what it had stored up during the day. The point is: can the Slitherers do the same?'

Norcross gave a harrassed look. 'If they *can* we're no better off! In winter, of course, the sun won't be above the horizon as long as it is now—Dammit, we'll never survive them that long anyway!'

After a moment Adams said: 'There's another point, too. The majority of Slitherers are intelligent due to their attacks on human beings. The higher intelligence there is the more energy is consumed: that's well known. On that premise the Slitherers would succumb much more quickly from a nightly loss of 250 than this one, which was of the non-intelligent variety.'

'It's a good theory,' Travers agreed. 'Even if we don't kill them we may at least weaken them enough to gain the upper hand.'

'Right, then, what do we do?' Norcross asked. 'How do we neutralise the Coxwold field and others like it?'

'There,' Travers mused, 'is our problem. We have to do two things: (a) stop the sunlight and radiation reaching the field, and (b) stop the emanations being given off by the field. Even cutting off the sun's radiations from the field won't stop the field itself emanating for a long time to come. We must block both, but the point is: how?'

'Cover the field with lead,' Norcross suggested. 'That will block the 250 from being given off by the field, and it will also stop the sun from handing it out. 250 won't go through lead, will it?'

'It will in time,' Travers sighed. 'Remember that 250 is even shorter than cosmic waves. The neutralisation would only be temporary, and again there is the possibility that in their frantic desire to get stimulus the Slitherers would gnaw through the lead. It's a soft metal and they'd easily destroy it. Most certainly they would if their lives depended on it.'

There was silence for a moment, then Travers seemed to come to a conclusion.

'I think the matter is best referred to Greenwich Observatory. They know far more about 250 than I do, so I'll see what they suggest. Meantime, Mr. Norcross, get the air force to work—tonight if possible—and pinpoint the exact areas where the Slitherers rejuvenate themselves. That will take most of the night if all England is to be covered. In the meantime, I'll find out all I can.'

'Fair enough,' Norcross agreed, glancing at his watch. 'And I'll see what the air force can do.'

Throughout the later afternoon and through the evening the Slitherers continued their depredations on London, completely disorganising whatever attempts were made to rectify matters. Towards evening reports came from the other side of the Atlantic of similar damage to that being inflicted on London. The Slitherers were plainly working to some kind of plan, keeping in touch with each other by some form of telepathy, which distance evidently did not weaken. As far as could be seen, their sole object seemed to be the removal of the human race from the scheme of things.

Meantime, both Travers and Norcross were busy—particularly Norcross. Once he reached the Air Ministry he did not have much trouble in securing what he needed. His request for three airplane squadrons was granted and, completely equipped with movie and still cameras and protected by a ring of fighter 'planes who would deal with any Slitherers who happened to interfere the time was set for midnight for departure from the London base.

It was arranged that Norcross should go with one squadron, Adams with another, and a third expert scientist with the third. From London the 'planes would travel south—the exact area to be covered in the first night being worked out on the map, and on succeeding nights the midland and northern areas of the country would be covered.

And, at sundown, came the report that the hordes of Slitherers were again retreating, presumably to their various homing grounds. At midnight the 'planes set off and swept into the misty dusk of the summer night. Under Norcross's direction, his own particular squadron headed for the Coxwold field and there, sure enough, it lay revealed—cramped end to end with the creatures. Immediately flares were dropped, bringing the scene into brilliance, and with that the movie and still cameras went into action.

It was all over in a few minutes and, undisturbed by Slitherers, the 'planes went their way on a toothcomb search. It was by no means an easy job as most of the country below was heavily misted—but searchlights and flares succeeded in penetrating most of the barriers and, wherever a rejuvenating area was detected, it was immediately logged, photographed, and pinpointed.

As the night wore on and the 'planes droned back and forth, Norcross admitted to a definite surprise at finding so many of the rejuvenating grounds. Evidently the Slitherers had a natural instinct for finding them. It was rather a shock to locate twenty grounds in the course of the night, and upon return to base the other two squadrons had a total of thirty six and thirty three respectively. And there were still the Midland, North, Scottish and Welsh areas to be investigated.

Once he had returned to London base, Norcross went home—dog weary after his activity in the grilling heat. But the next morning he was back at the Ministry laboratories again, and so was a fresh Slitherer onslaught. Then Travers turned up, and there was a gleam in his eye that foretold of success.

'Any luck?' he asked Norcross.

'Good enough. We located dozens of the grounds and they're all marked on the area maps, together with photographs. I've no need to go on any further investigations, nor have the others. The Air Force boys know what to look for... How about you?'

'The Greenwich staff, and myself, spent what was left of last evening until sundown, and every bit of this morning

after sunup, making tests of the 250 radiation, or rather making experiments to prevent its operation. Ultimately we landed on this.'

Travers took from his jacket pocket a small box. Inside was a package of tissue paper. He unwrapped it and brought to light an oblong slide of deep purple glass, so purple it seemed almost black.

'What is it?' Norcross asked curiously. 'One-way glass?'

'Yes—but with a difference. It's used a good deal in solar observations when visual observation has to replace photographic study. Have a look through it.'

Norcross held it to his eye. Everything seemed perfectly clear and yet somehow the light had gone out of things. It looked like the most perfect anti-dazzle shield ever devised.

'So?' Norcross asked, interested.

'You can look at the sun's photosphere through that, for hours if need be, and there'd be no damage done. It's semipolarizing glass made to a special formula. It sifts out infra red, ultra violet, cosmic, and 250 radiation. It turns them aside, even as it turns light waves. That's why there is no dazzle. In a modified form it is the same type of glass which is used for the goggles for ultra violet lamps. Proof too against X-rays. The technical name is hexomalene glass. But it is essential for it to face the right way. The right way is to have the ribbed surface facing the sun.'

'And that's our answer?' Norcross asked, surprised at the simplicity of it.

Travers did not answer immediately. Putting the glass oblong on the bench he picked up a big hammer and brought it down on the glass with tremendous force. Nothing happened. There was not even a crack.

'The complete answer,' Travers said. 'No Slitherer will ever be able to break it or chew through it. Only drawback is the cost when manufacturing a lot of it, but as the price of safety I reckon it's worth it.'

'And what do we do with it? Cover all the field areas?'

'There's a better way. Let us try for a moment to put ourselves in the place of the Slitherers. Assume we found our energy sadly impaired through being unable to absorb the stuff at night. What would we do?'

'Rest,' Norcross said, logically enough.

'And where to do that? A hundred to one the Slitherers will choose the same place as at night. That means they'll come back to the rejuvenating grounds, which of course won't do them any good because the earth-source of 250 is cut off.'

'They'll have the solar source, though,' Norcross pointed out.

'Not if that too is masked. They can get the solar source in the ordinary way anywhere during the daylight hours, but my hunch is that they will return to rest, thinking they can revive themselves that way, for I'm not giving them credit for being able to reason out that 250 is the sole reason for them being alive... So then, assuming they return to the resting grounds, we'll have them both ways. The more they stay at the resting grounds the weaker they'll get.'

Norcross nodded slowly. 'You've got something. A ground sheet of this glass, and then a kind of roof as well to cut off both ways?'

'I'd suggest a dome with a single entrance and a sliding door fitted for release by remote control. Don't you realise that when all these Slitherers are resting we can trap them wholesale? Whole fields of them! We've got them both ways. We can reduce their energy to zero, and if we can

we'll trap them as well. In about a day and a night a dome full of the horrors will have been wiped out. Then, shovel them away to the incinerators and leave the door open for any more beauties that may decide to take a rest.'

Norcross started heading for the door. 'I'm going to get some action,' he said, as he went. 'I'm going to get the powers-that-be to sweep everything aside so every conceivable factory can start manufacturing hexomalene glass ...'

Conscription of factories for the manufacture of hexomalene glass was obtained without difficulty, and once this was in hand it only remained for Norcross and his colleagues to draw the designs of the domes required, almost every one different because of the varying areas of the fields concerned.

Men and women worked day and night from then onwards, and every hexomalene factory was guarded constantly at ground level and on the roof. It proved needless, however, for evidently the Slitherers were not aware that something was being manufactured for their destruction. They continued their depredations on the principal cities, evidently rooted in the idea that once they could cripple the main arteries of civilised life they could also gain a permanent upper hand and wipe out human life altogether.

The air force, meanwhile, was hard at work plotting the exact positions where the domes could be placed, as well as operating a regular patrol to guard the transit of the domes from the factories to the required sites. At the actual sites themselves, work could only be done in the daytime as far as erection was concerned. Once sundown came, the human workers made themselves scarce and gave the Slitherers full rein.

The formula for hexomalene glass was passed to other governments and they too began an effective mobilisation for manufacture of the stuff, at the same time marshalling their air and ground forces for defensive uses. In these latter days of the Slitherers the earth's population resembled an overturned anthill, so immense was the activity in various directions.

Norcross's particular responsibility was of course the Coxwold field. Once he and his colleagues had figured out the dimensions of each dome for each field there was nothing more they could do beyond supervision, and explain to other dome supervisors what was required.

The dome on the Coxwold field was the first to be erected, as rapidly as possible in the daylight hours. Matters now had developed into a race between multiplying Slitherers and dome erection, for the horrors were increasing at a phenomenal rate in every country—and even the break in the weather, which finally came to produce high winds and thunderstorms did nothing to slow down the fecundity.

Norcross's engineers laboured without ceasing during daylight. They were drenched, wind-blown, became involved in accidents, were often dog-tired, but still they carried on, always with Norcross right on the job, whilst Travers and Adams were acting as supervisors in other parts of the country.

The Coxwold dome was completed at last and duly had its sliding door ready to drop into place. It occupied about a quarter of one wall and was drawn up over the curved roof, held there by a spring catch operated by an electrical circuit. From almost any distance the catch could be released at the touch of a switch and so make the dome unbreakable and entirely enclosed. This indeed was to be

the real test—the possible trapping of the horrors as they came to rest. Perhaps it would work; perhaps not. The Slitherers had shown more than a little suspicion in their movements as, each night, they had landed on the glass that covered their field. However, here was the acid test.

Norcross and his gathered men were more excited than they had ever been so far as, a mile distant and using powerful night glasses, they waited to spring the trap. And, true to type, the Slitherers came in their hordes immediately after sundown, but for quite a while they flew around the completed dome with a certain suggestion of panic. Certainly they had seen the thing on previous nights and settled within the shadows of its half completed walls—but now they had only one place by which to enter and maybe their mysterious intuitive powers warned them of trouble to come.

More hordes arrived, and still more. Norcross, silent among the engineers and equipment, waited with ever growing anxiety for something to happen.

'If the brutes shy at it we're going to be in a spot,' he commented.

'They'll settle finally,' one of the engineers commented confidently.

Norcross grunted and lifted the night glasses. They did not do him much good. All he could discern was the wild scrambling of the creatures over the outer surface of the dome. There were so many of them it was hard to tell there was a dome at all.

'I hope Travers was right,' Norcross said, lowering the glasses.

'About what?' the engineer asked.

'About the hexomaleine being indestructible. The way these brutes are stuck on it it looks as if they're destroying it.'

'Impossible, Mr. Norcross! The stuff will hardly splinter even under a pneumatic drill.'

Even though he had his doubts Norcross said no more—and he decided that he had evidently guessed wrong for, after a while, the Slitherers began to thin out somewhat and little by little began to vanish inside the dome.

'What did I tell you?' the engineer murmured. 'Everything's going to plan, Mr. Norcross. You say the word when we're to spring the trap.'

'Uh-huh.' Norcross was tensely watching. Then he began to smile to himself as gradually the dome and the sky cleared of the creatures and they gradually vanished from view inside the dome.

'Now!' Norcross said, at length.

The engineer nodded and promptly depressed the electric switch.

'Good!' Norcross murmured. 'That's sealed them in. Nothing more we can do now. We'll come back tomorrow and see what's happened.'

In daylight it was only too obvious what had happened. Norcross and his crew discovered the dome entirely empty of Slitherers and the trapdoor was still high up on the roof! It had evidently never even lowered. An examination proved that the lock itself, set in a metal frame, had been chewed to pieces, and though the wire leading to it was mainly embedded deep in the glass, it had been severed where a small section of it left the glass to make contact with the lock.

So even yet the problem was not done with. It demanded another week of work to devise a lock operated by radio,

with no external wires. The lock itself was set in a hexomaleine framework and covered at all vital points. Surely there was no chance of the Slitherers getting at *this*?

None, as events proved. That night, for the first time, Norcross and his engineers had the satisfaction of seeing the trap close at last on the slithering hordes. The information was immediately transmitted to the government and all other dome sites were advised to use the radio-type lock which was proof against the reptiles.

Morning brought a revelation indeed. The trapdoor was permitted to slide up under radio control and then, for a while, Norcross and his men stood waiting. They half expected trouble because they could not believe that they had got the upper hand of the situation. But they *had*, as later investigation proved.

When, after half an hour, there was no sign of activity around the opened dome, Norcross led his little party forward slowly across the slushy field. He kept his gun at the ready and did not allow his attention to be diverted for a single moment. Thuswise he finally reached the dome and looked uselessly through the one-way glass into the apparently black interior. Then he advanced to the open section and cautiously peered round the edge of it.

'It's unbelievable!' he whispered at last.

The others did not say anything. They were too busy looking at what had happened. Slitherers lay to a depth of nearly three feet. They were on top of each other and piled up against the inside of the dome in every available spot. And every one of them was dead. Already the fetid stench of decay was wafting into the morning air.

'Batch number one,' Norcross said briefly, at length putting his gun away. 'There's yet another reason for the rapidity of death, besides the cutting off of vital life radiation, and that's the fact that when this shutter is down the place is airtight. These things, there being so many of them, must have suffocated as well. . . . All the better!'

It did not take long to contact London and order the necessary disposal squads to work; then Norcross checked up on the other dome fields and founds that there was success there too. Suffocation and absence of 250 had brought death to tens of thousands of the hideous reptiles during the night—but the fight would not be over until every one of the hordes was exterminated. . . . And this took many weeks.

In the end, in the early spring, there came reports that no Slitherers had attacked, nor had any returned to roost. There could only be one answer to that. . . . they had all gone.

'Just the same,' Norcross said to his colleagues, when they discussed the matter at the Ministry, 'I think it might be as well to leave the domes for the time being. There might be one or two who have perhaps found a breeding ground in some remote spot, a means of obtaining 250 which has not been discovered by watchful humanity. And from one could spring two; and from two, four—and so on.'

Many were the speculations of Norcross and the scientists in the quiet months which followed the victory. Some of the brutes might even be hibernating somewhere. After all, nobody knew anything about them or how long their hibernation periods were, or even if they hibernated at all.

Yet still nothing happened and the grass grew round the edges of the domes and nobody did anything about them. They still stood even after Norcross was dead; and the advent of the Slitherers had faded from memory. . . .

The sun was low in the sky when mine host had finished his story. I had been listening attentively and it came almost as a shock when he stopped.

'Another drink, sir?' he asked, rising.

'After that I certainly would.'

'It'll be getting it for you.'

He brought me a beer, and one for himself. Sitting down again he looked speculatively towards the blue dome in the distance.

'And that's how it was, sir,' he said, shrugging. 'Norcross got the better of the whole thing, more by luck than judgment. The Slitherers vanished and only the blue domes showed that they had ever been here at all.'

'And all this happened something like sixty years ago?' I asked. And as he looked at me rather oddly I added, 'I'm taking a guess at your age, if you'll forgive me. You said it all happened when you were a nipper.'

'Aye, it did that. Well—shortly after Norcross died—somebody started a scare by saying that a Slitherer had been seen in Central America. Later, somebody else saw one—and then another. Just isolated instances as you might say, but these folk seemed pretty sure. Scientists said it was possible that some of the things had escaped to the jungles of Central America and there found plenty of sunshine and 250 radiation from the ground, and had multiplied and survived the fate of their fellows.'

I gave a little shiver, and it was not altogether because a chill had come into the evening air.

'How long ago was this?' I asked.

'Not long. About ten years mebbe.'

'Not a happy thought to think that Slitherers may still be in existence!'

'No. That was why they left the blue domes, in case they might be needed again...' Mine host took a deep drink, then when he spoke again his rustic-style speech had vanished. 'Doesn't it occur to you that many things might have happened to those few Slitherers who were given the chance to evolve? The advance guard—the killers and plunderers—were the rudimentary form of life given birth by the accidental catalyst of the dextro-ne... Imagine if they had had the chance to evolve and multiply in peace! What they might have become!'

'Become?' I repeated rather stupidly, at a loss to understand the landlord's change of manner.

He went on, 'They had the power to reason, and think. True, it was stolen in the first place; but after that it became hereditary. When a thinking Slitherer divided itself into two, the second creature also had that power transmitted to it... Imagine the picture, then! Intelligent Slitherers evolving without interruption, and in the course of evolution one automatically moves away from the killing stage to one of reason, even as do humans in their evolution from the cave-man to the scientist.'

'Just what do you mean?' I asked deliberately, and at that he rose and looked at me. There was a look in his eyes which I could not fathom—an other-worldly look, somehow.

'Those few surviving Slitherers could—and did—increase their numbers indefinitely. They were a new form of life born without a native planet. The only planet they had was the one on which they found themselves. Owning that planet, and strutting proudly upon it, were human beings, creatures who in time became lower in intellect than the Slitherers. Despite their now high intelligence the Slitherers in their reptilian form knew that slaughter would await them if they ventured into the outer world. What, then,

should they do?'

I got to my feet too and stood waiting. The other-world eyes were upon me.

'All they could do was use their powers of intellectual drainage—if I might call it that—on whatever human beings they happened to encounter and then, having the empty shell, so to speak, transfer their mentalities into it and withdraw from their own useless and very repulsive bodies. You would call it death, but to a creature who lives by dividing itself death is death of the *mind*, not the body. A Slitherer can, and does, abandon its body at will, so high is the evolution pinnacle now reached.'

I caught the beer glass with my elbow and it shattered onto the tiled path. The landlord smiled.

'Don't be disturbed,' he said. 'The Slitherers have grown up now. Once they have a human body they can take another human body, and marry. There can be children, half-Slitherer, half-human, or all Slitherer basically depending on whether the two who are married have their own bodies, or have just—er—borrowed them...'

Mine host looked towards the sunset. 'These things can't be helped,' he said. 'It just happens—an accident as big as life itself. In this case, because a girl dropped meat paste sandwiches the course of the world was changed.'

'I must be going,' I said abruptly. 'I didn't think it was so late... Thanks for your most interesting story.'

I turned and hurried away from the inn as fast as I could go. Once I looked back towards the blue dome and wondered if the farmer had been spinning a yarn. Then I recalled how he had reverted suddenly to intelligent conversation. Because of that I have written this story... to warn you.

The man with whom you play golf, the girl who sits next to you in the 'bus, the man who brings your milk... Any of them might belong to the new race which came to Earth through no fault of its own. Any of them might be... a Slitherer.



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The Impatient Dreamers

JOHN CARNELL

*How Britain's first post-war
sf magazine came into being
is revealed in fascinating
detail by John Carnell, editor
of "New Worlds"*

12. The Birth of New Worlds

It was the last week in January 1946, typically cold and bleak. I had been demobilised from the Army the previous week, still apparently fit and sane after five and a half years' service. A grateful Government had given me a complete civilian outfit, three months pay and allowances and a bonus of £80 (which I had promptly spent on a 9 inch television set). I had just visited my pre-war firm in Holborn, only to find that the printing department had been firebombed out of existence in 1941 and was walking down Fleet Street contemplating my next move, when I met bibliophile and author Frank Edward Arnold. From such a small event the lives of many people, including my own, were to be shaped.

Frank, who was then working in the offices of the daily *News-Chronicle*, had been one of our non-combatant anchormen during the war years and had kept in touch with most of the serving science fiction people, even contriving to organise a couple of minicons when sufficient people were in and around London on leave. We had plenty to talk over in one of the Street's celebrated coffee houses. His main news was that he was preparing to edit a series of 'little books' for a publisher 'just round the corner', to be called 'The Spacetime Series', containing short novels. If I still had my plans for the aborted 1940 *New Worlds* on file, he thought we should pay the enthusiastic publisher a visit and sound out the possibility of a regular sf magazine.

There were many realistic arguments against such a visit but Frank convinced me that there was no harm in trying, so we walked along Chancery Lane into Lincoln's Inn and up to the top floor of No. 10 Old Square, where the name plate read *Pendulum Publications Ltd*. There I was introduced to one Stephen D. Frances, a mercurial young man full of enthusiasm for science fiction (and later to become universally famed as thriller writer 'Hank Janson'). Steve Frances was convinced that sf would rapidly become a universally popular form of fiction—were we not already in the throes of a technological explosion brought on through the exigencies of war? He could see no end to the advancement of science or to the possibilities of science fiction

going hand in hand with it. He was also a very astute young publisher.

Every objection I raised was counterbalanced—paper, printing, production, art work, distribution—leave it to Pendulum. All I had to do was find good material. I finally left the office having been given carte blanche to edit and produce the first two issues of *New Worlds*, if possible on a quarterly basis. A flat fee was to be paid to myself out of which I would pay the authors.

At that time Pendulum Publications was already publishing a number of 'series', all edited by freelance editors; there were 'Popular' westerns, thrillers, detective, sport, film, adventure, politics and even a science series. Apart from Frank Arnold's 'Spacetime' series, Steve Frances also gave me the go-ahead to think about a fantasy series as well as a weird fiction series. I left his office with mixed feelings—partly of elation but largely disbelief in the existence of fairy godfathers.

My first job was to re-establish contact with the many pre-war friends, most of whom had been amateur sf authors or at best semi-professional. The Services were beginning to release those around my age group and I found that many had kept up their literary efforts despite wartime journeyings and had unpublished material on file. Bill Temple, who had spent a lot of his spare time in Italy writing a novel which periodically was either blown up or sunk in transit home (it was eventually published in 1949 by John Lang as *The Four-Sided Triangle*) sent me an unusual fantasy titled 'The Three Pylons'. Some of the regulars were still around—W. P. Cockcroft, Maurice G. Hugi and the indefatigable John Russell Fearn.

Fearn responded to my urgent request for material by sending over one quarter of a million words and in all those first few months produced over half a million, all of which had to be read and from which a selection had to be chosen for that first vital issue. As that began to take shape, my old SFA colleague, Ken Chapman, came out of the Navy and we arranged a meeting in Mooney's Irish House in Fetter Lane (owing to the beer shortage, we were only allowed one half pint on that occasion). Discussing

the plans for the new magazine, Ken suggested that we tried to arrange a monthly meeting of all our pre-war colleagues, as this would give me an opportunity of talking to them about editorial requirements. This was quickly arranged in March and I remember meeting Maurice Hugi for the first time. Also present were Harold Chibbett, Bill Temple, Fred Brown, Eric Williams, Alan Devereaux, Frank Arnold, Ken Chapman and several others.

The next month we moved across the road to the 'White Horse' tavern, where accommodation was larger and the supply of beer more liberal. We were soon joined by John Beynon Harris (who was soon to start his 'John Wyndham' career), Arthur C. Clarke, Walter Gillings, Sydney J. Bounds, Harry Kay and most of the former attendees at the Grays Inn 'Flat'.

Those 'White Horse' meetings soon became weekly and were the forerunners of all the subsequent 'London Circle' meetings which continued over 'The Globe' in Hatton Garden, where aficionados still meet regularly on the first Thursday in every month. By no means an insignificant achievement over twenty-four years.

The first professional issue of *New Worlds* took shape and rounded out with two novelettes: 'The Mill of the Gods', by Maurice G. Hugi and 'The Three Pylons', by William F. Temple, plus four short stories, all of which were written by John Russell Fearn—i.e. 'Solar Assignment' by 'Mark Denholm'; 'Knowledge Without Learning' by 'K. Thomas'; 'White Mouse' by 'Thornton Ayre', and

Sweet Mystery Of Life' under his own name. Cover art and interiors were by Bob Wilkin, one of the many artists employed by Pendulum. It was published in July, price 2s.; 64 pages quarto and subtitled 'A Fiction Magazine of the Future'.

Its sales were disastrous. Out of a print run of 15,000 copies, only 3,000 were sold. The postmortem at Pendulum's office (and subsequently at the 'White Horse') was rigorous but the general consensus was almost complete apathy in the wholesale distributing trade. One point, however; I was insistent upon—the second issue, already committed to the printer, needed an eye-catching cover painting. I had never approved the first one; in fact, I never saw it until it was completed, although I liked the original idea. This stemmed from Frank Arnold—an atomic explosion in the background, nude New Man foreground, futuristic buildings left and ruins of old-style buildings right. However the execution was flat and two dimensional, dull and uninspiring.

I designed the cover of No. 2 from a montage of several American covers. I had (and still have) an original Howard Brown oil painting of the July 1937 *Astounding SF* which illustrated the Eric Frank Russell and Leslie Johnson story 'Seeker Of Tomorrow'. To this was added a spaceship design from a 1938 cover from *Amazing Stories* and from this sketch artist Victor Caesari evolved a spaceship cover to illustrate 'Space Ship 13' by Patrick S. Selby. While not technically perfect it still had good balance and colour and was a striking improvement over No. 1. Plus a wider variety of authors—a new John Beynon story, 'The Living Lies', plus Thornton Ayre and Polton Cross (both Fearn pseudonyms), W. P. Cockerott, new authors Patrick Selby and John Brody, and a short, 'The Micro Man' by Alden Lorraine (one of many pseudonyms used by our old American friend, Forrest J. Ackerman). Articles by Leslie Johnson and Forrest Ackerman, plus a drum-beating editorial.

That second issue was published in October and was almost instantaneously a sell-out due almost entirely to an all out drive by the Pendulum group. In fact, it was oversold by more than 3,000 copies, which led directly to the publisher deciding to strip out the 'No. 2' on the cover blocks, insert 'No. 1', print 10,000 new covers and replace the cover on the 10,000 unsold still lying in the warehouse. Even that venture was a selling success and if anyone has a copy in their collection, I can say that they don't have the original No. 1.

So, as the year ended, Britain's sf future looked fairly bright. In December, the long-delayed first issue of *Fantasy: The Magazine of Science Fiction*, edited by Walter Gillings and published by Temple Bar Publishing Co. had appeared, pocket-sized, 96 pages and retailing at 1s. (which was something of a blow to the Pendulum controlled *New Worlds*). Walter's editorial policy, now backed by a publisher of considerable repute, was as ambitious as my own and it looked as though the healthy rivalry we expected to grow between us would be good for the authors and entice many new writers to try their skill in this somewhat demanding medium. Frank Arnold's 'Spacetime' series was off the ground with *Wings Across Time*, a collection of four of his own stories and I had produced *Jinn and Jitters*, a collection of five fantasy stories in the Pendulum 'Fantasy' series. It was followed by John Russell Fearn's novel *Other Eyes Watching*, reprinted from the American *Startling Stories* under the pseudonym of Polton Cross.

New Worlds

No. 1 FICTION OF THE FUTURE Vol. I



Bob Wilkin's symbolical cover for the original first issue of 'New Worlds.' Its flat execution did little to help sales.

Listed as a short novel for No. 2 was Lyle Monroe's 'Lost Legacy' (Robert A. Heinlein). The weekly meetings at the 'White Horse' had swollen to over thirty regulars and now included Sam Youd (soon to write under the name of 'John Christopher'), John Burke, E. C. Tubb, Kenneth Bulmer, merchant navy officer A. Bertram (Jack) Chandler whenever he was in port, John Newman and many others.

1947 started well enough. Encouraged by the rapidly expanding sf market, Walter Gillings commenced publication of his vitally important bi-monthly news magazine *Fantasy Review*. I had been given the okay to go ahead with *New Worlds* No. 3 due for March publication, although the bad winter which subjected the country to power cuts was only the beginning of a series of setbacks which delayed final publication until the end of October! But the Spring was full of promise. Bill Passingham's eldest son, Kenneth, with a natural flair for artistry, had produced a cover painting I liked—now a prominent Fleet Street journalist, Ken has probably long forgotten his incursion into the world of science fiction under the pseudonym 'Slack'). His painting was a scene from a long novelette titled 'Dragon's Teeth' by John K. Aiken, who had been the former president of the Teddington Cosmos Club. It was the forerunner of two further novelettes, 'Phoenix Nest' and 'Cassandra', the whole making a complete novel of a revolutionary nature for those days. (Ironically, it never saw book publication until 1969, when John Hale published it under the title of *Phoenix Nest*).

New writers were beginning to submit good stories; Arthur Clarke submitted a short story, 'Inheritance', which was scheduled for No. 3 under the pseudonym of 'Charles Willis'; Francis G. Rayner, long a technical radio expert, sent his first story 'From Beyond The Dawn', John Brody had his second acceptance with 'The Inexorable Laws'. Yet another newcomer, Nick Boddy Williams, was placed in that third issue with 'The Terrible Morning'. Finally the editorial contents were rounded off with what was to be Maurice G. Hugi's last written work, 'Fantasia Dementia', for he died early in that year at his home in North London. He was only 43. What we did not know until afterwards was that in 1946 when we had all met for that first post-war gathering, Maurice already knew that he only had a year to live. So British sf lost its first great character.

The Spring lengthened into Summer and the third issue of Walter Gillings' *Fantasy* was published—but not the third issue of *New Worlds*. Delays were caused by printing problems, blockmakers, difficulties in obtaining paper, power cuts and finally Pendulum Publications began to run into financial difficulties. However, during the go-slow period I had still gone ahead preparing No. 4 and had four novelettes scheduled—'World In Shadow' by John Brody, 'Edge Of Night' by John K. Aiken, and from USA, 'Was Not Spoken' by E. Everett Evans and 'Bighead' by William de Koven. The latter was a pseudonym for a then well-known American author but neither my memory nor records throw any light on his true identity. Short stories were accepted from Patrick S. Selby and Norman Lazenby (who was already appearing in *Fantasy*) and I was planning to use that great pre-war Manchester fan artist Harry Turner.

By October, when the long-delayed third issue finally went on sale at a reduced selling price of 1/6d., the publisher had moved to less pretentious premises in Chancery Lane with a reduced staff and an ever-increasing list of



Victor Caesari's space cover, actually a composite of two American magazine covers, contributed to the sales success of the magazine's second issue.

periodicals. In November I was given a cheque for the editorial expenses, paid the authors out on my own cheque, then received the Pendulum cheque back marked 'Refer to Drawer'. A stormy session with the publisher's accountant drew an apology and the assurance that if I would present the cheque again, it would be fully met. Which I did, only to have it bounce again. This time there was only Steve Frances left in the remnants of Pendulum's offices, clearing up on behalf of the Official Receiver. The accountant-secretary had disappeared leaving an empty coffer and all that Steve could offer me was a suitcase full of the first three issues of *New Worlds*, which I carried away and stored in my attic until their value increased sufficiently for me to start selling them on the collectors' market. Even then it took over ten years to recoup the £80 editorial fee I dropped in 1947—but by then many new events had taken place and a new *New Worlds* had risen from the ashes of the old.

As if in sympathy and at just about the same time, Walter Gillings announced the suspension of his professional magazine, *Fantasy*, after publication of its third issue. So the year closed dismally, with only the cheering commiserations of the ever-increasing band of fellow travellers at the 'White Horse' to carry the glowing embers.

(In our next issue Walter Gillings recalls the famous 'Fantasy Review' and its eventual metamorphosis into a companion to 'New Worlds'.)

MARS: NOT-SO-FRIENDLY NEIGHBOUR? By DAVID A. HARDY, F.R.A.S., A.F.B.I.S.

Ever since Wells, Mars has been regarded by science fiction writers as the most likely abode of extra-terrestrial life in our Solar System, and also the planet on which Earthmen might live in conditions not too different from their native planet. Many of the stories written have been extremely believable—more like scientific extrapolation than fiction: one could easily imagine the world described in *Clarke's Sands of Mars*, and even the poetic imaginings of Bradbury often seemed far from impossible.

Let's look at the facts as they appeared prior to the Space Age. The first sketch of Mars by telescope was made by Huyghens in 1659, and showed a dark marking now known as *Syrtis Major*. As observations developed, it was known that Mars has white polar caps which grow or shrink with the Martian 'seasons', whilst at the same time grey, bluish or greenish markings also change shape and colour, often becoming brown as they grow. The obvious inference was that water from the melting ice-caps brought to life vegetation which had lain dormant through the winter. (Mars' year is 687 of our days, and its day 24 hours 37 minutes.)

When in 1877 Schiaparelli announced that he had detected narrow streaks, which he called *canali*, meaning channels, passing from one dark area to another, this seemed to clinch the idea of water flowing on Mars. In 1894 Lowell commenced observing Mars from Flagstaff, Arizona, and discovered a whole network of narrow lines, sometimes double, which were by now known as canals. Their narrowness and straightness ruled out natural explanations. Lowell asserted, so they were artificial: the vegetation growing along watercourses dug by intelligent Martians to irrigate their dying planet...

This theory was by no means universally accepted, and many astronomers, especially in Europe, tried to explain away the canals as optical effects or illusions. Over the years it finally became accepted that there were dusty streaks, but not as regular as Schiaparelli or Lowell drew them, and that closer observation would probably resolve them into disconnected patches. As spectroscopes, polarimeters, and ultra-violet and infra-red photography began to be used on the planet it also became apparent that Mars was not as Earth-like as had once been hoped. The atmosphere was very thin and composed largely of carbon dioxide, and there was little positive evidence of water vapour. Worse still, life-giving oxygen seemed to be absent. By the early 1960's, then, the picture which was generally accepted was this:

A small, dry world 4,220 miles in diameter, orbiting the Sun at a distance which varies from 128,500,000 to 154,500,000 miles—more than half as far again as the Earth, so that sunlight is less than half as strong. A surface consisting of reddish-ochre deserts, but of dust rather than sand, occasionally swept up into the thin air by winds, forming the 'yellow clouds' seen from Earth. A rather monotonous, flat landscape with no mountains and few hills, but broken by large areas of green-grey—probably some form of primitive, lichen-like vegetation fed by water flowing through the atmosphere as vapour, released by the shrinking poles; but not poles of thick, solid ice and snow like ours, more like a thin layer of hoar-frost, receding at a rate of 160 miles a day in the Martian spring. And an atmosphere less than a tenth as dense as ours and composed largely of carbon dioxide and nitrogen, sometimes

with high 'blue' clouds of ice crystals or lower white ones.

There are two tiny moons, Phobos and Deimos, 3,700 and 12,500 miles above the surface respectively, Phobos appearing to rise in the west and set in the east; but neither helping much to lighten the Martian night, when the temperature could drop to -60°F (prevented from falling even lower only by a thin mist which forms at night, trapping some of the heat radiated by the surface).

Then in 1965 the picture suddenly changed drastically. Man had finally sent a spacecraft to within 6,000 miles of the red planet, and America's Mariner 4 relayed to Earth 22 photographs as it streaked by. A final answer to the canal enigma? Evidence of life? No. Craters! Mars was finally revealed as a world looking disappointingly like our own familiar Moon, pockmarked with craters—though rather more shallow and smooth-looking than the lunar ones, perhaps eroded by wind or water, and sometimes rimmed with frost. No sign of canals, except one straightish fault, though since only a narrow strip of the planet had been scanned this was not positive proof of their non-existence either. If one accepts the meteoric theory of crater formation, craters on Mars should perhaps have been expected, since it is so much closer to the Asteroid Belt—indeed, we might have expected many more.

Adhering to the volcanic theory, I suggested at the time that the canals, if they *did* exist, might be due to 'rays' like those extending from lunar craters, vegetation thriving more on the fertile lava than on the barren desert on to which it had been ejected.

Mariner 4's instruments also reported that Mars has no appreciable magnetic field, which could give a clue to the shortage of oxygen and water. Perhaps in the formation process the iron present did not sink to the planet's centre to form a core like Earth's, but remained near the surface, there to 'rust' and use up the oxygen and water. The fact that the surface is red bears this out, for the orange-red mineral limonite is an iron oxide and reflects light in much the same way as the Martian deserts. It would be just possible for life to evolve, though, before conditions became too hostile, and not inconceivable for it to adapt to today's conditions in some form.

A few days after Man's epic first landing on the Moon in 1969, Mariners 6 and 7 sent back really detailed pictures from within 2,000 miles of Mars, which merely confirmed the earlier ones. But some American scientists analysing the data announced that the polar caps consist not of water ice but of carbon dioxide 'snow': furthermore, the dark areas were said to be similar to the Moon's grey lowland plains, on to which the lighter-coloured dust was deposited by seasonal winds and in turn removed, accounting for the changes in shape and colour. Mars, it seemed, was finally relegated to the rôle of a dead planet.

The picture may not be quite so black. Firsoff has pounded very sound reasons why the poles are more likely to consist of frozen water than CO_2 , based partly on the fact that CO_2 would be gaseous, not frozen at temperatures which have been recorded at the poles and at the atmospheric pressure there. If there can still be doubts on something as apparently basic as this, it is obvious that we still have a lot to learn about the red planet, and only a manned landing (perhaps as soon as 1985) will really give us the truth: Mars may still hide some surprises!





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CASSANDRA'S CASTLE

by Lee Harding

Consider Conrad's folly.

She was the richest and most beautiful woman in the known universe—or so the story goes.

Her father's empire spanned more star systems than the ships of the Imperial Terran Space Navy cared to police. The ruthless expansion of his gargantuan business enterprises had condoned every malpractice that the mind of man could devise, and he had accumulated more wealth and power than any individual in the whole of recorded history.

Yet he harboured no love for his fellow creatures. They had grovelled for his favours for centuries, trying to grab for themselves a modicum of the vast fortune he had wrung from a hostile universe, and he loathed the writhings of their miserable little minds.

He despised all the dark things he had discovered within himself, but he loved his fair daughter, Cassandra, more than all his worldly wealth and magnificence. Bright blossom of a disastrous early marriage, she had soon become

the beautiful blonde harvest which had eased the aftermath of that desolate union. Throughout her tragically short childhood he had showered her with gifts and lavished his lonely affections upon her dazzling innocence. He transported her from one corner of the inhabited universe to another, filling her hungry young mind with the most marvellous things he could find, leading her into one gay adventure after another, and never realising how much more her bewildered young eyes really saw. She was his fairy-tale princess, his daughter, the avatar of all his delights, the soul to which he cleaved when he sought refuge from the many scourges that pursued his immortal life.

When she reached her majority, and was enjoined into the eternal springtime of her immeasurably long lifetime, he showered her with planets for playthings and empires of her own to administer. For a while she amused herself with these faceless little mannikins and their pointless lives, but eventually—and, perhaps, inevitably—she grew weary of



ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

by Richard
A. Gordon

Immediately John Martin's respiration faltered, the Sleepy-time ads, which were transmitted to his brain by the apparatus concealed in his mattress, cut themselves off automatically. He awoke feeling he really must book a seat for at least one of the Shakespeare Festival productions next week. And this was odd; for he was disgusted by the inhumanity of the Plays. It was even more odd if one considered that his typically academic indiscretion in writing to the *Stage Weekly* the previous year condemning a particularly bloodthirsty production of *Hamlet* was almost certain to land him in a leading—and therefore fatal—role in one of the Plays this year. But perhaps the implanted desire to support the 2036 Festival which he awoke fighting each morning wasn't so strange if one considered that Tudor Holdings Inc., the vast corporation from which Martin's university had rented his flat, was itself financed from the vast yearly profits of the huge Shakespeare Festival organisation. In fact, the organisation, under many different names, was landlord to the vast majority of the British Landed population.

The corporation-provided robo-girl stirred in response to his awakening, and he flicked a switch in its tousled hair, freezing an artificial smile on its face. The room switched on the wall-screen, and the daily Festival propaganda began. He grimaced, unable to avoid it. A harsh voice screamed: 'Shakespeare Festival just one week away! Book now for the many star attractions! Greater realism than ever!'

The screen showed what was meant by Greater Realism. Brutus and Cassius stabbed Caesar, who staggered with agonised expression, silver knife in his back punctuating his gasp: 'Et tu, Brute?', before collapsing in a spreading pool of blood.

Martin moved hurriedly into the tiny bathroom, where as he washed he was given no relief. The small mirror-screen displayed a buxom Cleopatra in the act of applying the asp, perishing with the desirable maximum of pain, while a husky female voice ordered him to get right down to the Avon Theatre and book seats NOW! Back in the living room, bed and robo-girl had been cleared away into the wall and replaced by the breakfast table, while the screen displayed Richard III perishing at Bosworth; the tableau completed by the careful placing of a bloodstained sword into the king's ruined body at a suitably aesthetic angle. A voice howled: 'You can SEE and EXPERIENCE Richard of England in his death agonies as his foul tyranny is vanquished by Noble Justice!'

Martin averted his thin face from the ads and toyed with his cereal. For several days now he had awaited the visiphone call which would inform him of his selection—which would almost certainly prove to be fatal. Although official figures were not released, it was rumoured that several thousand people died yearly in the bloody reconstructions of Shakespeare's more gory tragedies. Civilisation affected to despise sham. Every stage death had to be real, each year, millions of cheerful families treated their kiddies to a Play, they were something to reminisce about for another year, an oasis of violent reality in a desert of urban unreality. Martin had seen his parents die in a production of *Antony and Cleopatra* when he was ten for a crime he had never understood. A state orphanage and subsequent academic career had finally, inevitably, led to his impractical indignation boiling over in the writing of a suicidal letter criticising the autocratic order. That letter had exorcised his twenty-seven years of mental sterility, but it was

